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Allegiances

[image]

RAINCLAN

LEADER: Snowstar- Large old tom with a thick pelt as white as snow.

DEPUTY: Suntail- White she-cat with ginger markings and an unmistakable blond tail.

MEDICINE CAT: Webear- Long, black she-cat with a white twitchy ear.

WARRIORS:

Toadface- Old grey tom with a disfigured face and stumpy tail.

Stormspirit- Handsome grey tom. **Mentor to Scarpaw.**

Sagefur- Dusty, tawny tom with pale eyes.

Owltail- Blond tabby tom. **Mentor to Leopardpaw.**

Pepperpelt- Beautiful spotted she-cat. **Mentor to Sparkpaw.**

Venomsight- Dark striped tom with strange eyes. **Mentor to Woodpaw.**

Nightbreeze- Black and white she-cat. **Mentor to Maskpaw.**

Patchnose- Calico she-cat with blue eyes.

APPRENTICES:

Scarpaw- Long-haired tabby she-cat with a scarred hind leg.

Leopardpaw- Silver bengal she-cat with pale eyes.

Woodpaw- Small brown tom.

Sparkpaw- Pale blond tabby tom.

Maskpaw- Sleek tortoiseshell tom with bright eyes.

QUEENS:

Rosegaze- Pale brown pelt with piercing amber eyes.

Berryface- Stocky tortoiseshell, oldest nursery queen.

Dawnleaf- Pale brown and white fur.

ELDERS:

Slowcloud- White tom with soft grey spots.

Fawneyes- Once beautiful tawny she-cat.

Deadmouth- Mute black tom with a twisted jaw.

Coldclaw- Dark grey tom with silver paws.

MAPLECLAN

LEADER: Tanglestar- Pale stocky she-cat with matted, curly fur. **Mentor to Hawkpaw.**

DEPUTY: Sootstep- Pale tabby tom.

MEDICINE CAT: Smallglow- Short orange tabby she-cat.

WARRIORS:

Snakefang- Dark tom with a silver under-belly.

Tinywind- Light brown she-cat.

Morningstare- Calico she-cat with half a tail.

Silentfeather- Silver tom with a white muzzle.

Quickstream- Beautiful she-cat with deep blue eyes. **Mentor to Reedpaw.**

Brighteye- Calico tom with a dark tail. **Mentor to Fernpaw.**

APPRENTICES:

Hawkpaw- Dark long haired tabby she-cat.

Reedpaw- Jumpy grey tom.

Fernpaw- Pale she-cat with small ears.

QUEENS:

Hollowsong- Pale she-cat with a droopy face.

Shadowleap- Dark pointed she-cat.

ELDERS:

Shortripple- Patchy she-cat, and oldest cat in MapleClan.

MISTCLAN

LEADER: Crowstar- Dark, skinny tom with a long tail.

DEPUTY: Sheepfur- Curly haired tom with a small muzzle. **Mentor to Dovepaw.**

MEDICINE CAT: Pineflight- Long-haired grey she-cat with amber eyes, oldest medicine cat. **Mentor to Snailpaw.**

WARRIORS:

Hailfleck- Silver she-cat. **Mentor to Bushpaw.**

Puddlepelt- Small calico tom with missing teeth.

Birdheart- Grey tom with a white chest.

Flatfoot- Brown tabby tom. **Mentor to Aspenpaw.**

Yellowtail- White she-cat with a ginger tail.

Sapjaw- Brown pointed she-cat.

APPRENTICES:

Snailpaw- Long-haired tortoiseshell she-cat with multi-colored eyes.

Aspenpaw- Tawny tom with strange patterns.

Bushpaw- Toned brown tabby tom.

Dovepaw- White she-cat with pale eyes.

QUEENS:

Clearsky- Pale white pelt with ginger socks.

ELDERS:

Mossyclaw- Dark long-haired tabby tom.

Shadeheart- Grey she-cat with a blind eye.

THORNCLAN

LEADER: Pebblestar- Large tom with grey and black patches.

DEPUTY: Eelstrike- Grey tabby tom with dark paws.

MEDICINE CAT: Lizardeye- Skinny tom with strange green eyes.

WARRIORS:

Quailtooth- Small patchy tom with a bad underbite.

Shellswipe- Quick she-cat with pale ears.

Seedwind- Dark tortoiseshell with a long tail.

Willowfur- Long-haired she-cat with a dark muzzle. **Mentor to Quickpaw.**

Marley- Large brown tom.

Opal- Ginger she-cat.

Newt- Spotted tawny tom.

APPRENTICES:

Quickpaw- Small calico tom with pale fur.

ELDERS:

Curlclaw- Long-haired pale tom.

Addermouth- Tawny she-cat.

Prologue

[image]

The white tom sat silently on the moon-lit grass. Fresh dew wet his fur, but he stayed perfectly still, fixated on the starry sky above. He could see Silverpelt clearly.

"Nothing tonight," he called, letting out a low sigh. Despite the rising levels of tension within his clan and his attempts to seek guidance, Starclan had been quiet. *Too quiet.* Neither the leader nor his medicine cat had been able to make any kind of connection to their starry ancestors at all for moons now. With a flick of his tail, the white tom signaled to the she-cat hiding in the nearby bramble to emerge. Her light fur snagged on the branches around her but she remained silent, afraid to interrupt her leaders focus.

"Shall we head back to camp, then?" She mewed after a long period of silence. The tom turned away from her.

"Yes, I suppose that would be best. But..." He looked back up at the sky for a moment. The she-cat stared into his icy gaze.

"Snowstar, it is late... you need to rest."

Snowstar flashed a look towards his deputy, her orange tail twitching in surprise as he spoke, "These are dark times for our clan, Suntail. What I need is answers." The words spilled out of his mouth with a sharp tone. Shutting his tired eyes, Snowstar let out a shaky breath. "Come, we should start heading back to camp; we are nearing Mistclan territory." Suntail hesitated for a moment before walking forward, brushing against the elder leaders side in support.

"Do not worry, Snowstar. I'm sure Starclan will show us their message soon enough." The white tom solemnly nodded, feeling hopeless, standing to follow his deputy back home when he felt a sudden jolt - white heat flashed behind his eyes in a fiery explosion. Visions of blood-stained pelts and the stench of death surrounded him, causing him to stagger and thrash wildly. The wails of cats in

pain stretched out ahead of him, filling his senses, overwhelming his every thought. Through the panicked haze, however, the silhouette of a young cat stood out against a red stained sky. Dark shadows surrounded them, lunging, leading the unknown cat straight over a sheer cliff. Just as their body disappeared beyond his vision, the voices of many cats boomed in Snowstar's ears, screaming,

"BLOOD OR CLAN."

The vision faded, leaving Snowstar gasping for breath, shaking against the ground. Suntail padded him franticly, brushing against his pelt, her eyes wide and ears pressed flat with shock.

"Snowstar, what's happening? Speak to me!"

He slowly raised his head, blinking, as his thoughts began to clear. Gulping, he staggered to his paws, using her as support to stand. A cold breeze blew around the two as he gazed off in the distance, the stench of death still surrounding his senses.

"Starclan has spoken..."

Chapter 1

[image]

Scarpaw licked her jowls, her eyes set on a young muskrat collecting twigs near the waters edge. Mangroves and vines hid her from her prey, and her dark fur blended in with her surroundings. The damp, swampy air helped dull her scent.

This would be easy.

Her tail twitched in excitement; she could already taste it. The muskrat stopped messing with some reeds and stared out towards the water, and she started slowly stalking forwards, being sure to step only in the mud around her. She grew closer and closer until she was in pouncing reach, eyes trained directly on her target. With a twitch of her whiskers, Scarpaw raised her haunches and leapt, bursting from her hiding place in the thick undergrowth towards the sandy shore. The muskrat let out a small screech as she grabbed it with her front claws, sinking her strong teeth into it's neck, holding tight until she felt the body go limp. She could taste it's sweet blood, tempted to take a bite as her mentors words rang through her head:

"A warrior always feeds the clan before themselves."

With much effort , she carried it away from the water and back into the swamp without as much as a lick. Rainclan was set in the center of wooded marsh and waterways, requiring an experienced cat to find good hunting in the difficult territory. Scarpaw was out hunting in the farther end of the swamp, where it was mostly water and mud; she was used to the feeling of a wet pelt, so wading through the grimy water didn't bother her much.

She was nearing the end of a hunting assessment by her mentor, Stormspirit.

Raising her head, she looked looked up towards the high mangroves and trees above her, attempting to try and spot her

mentor. He was watching her, and she knew it; but she couldn't see or smell him anywhere.

"How can he disguise himself so well? I sure have much to learn," she thought to herself, admiring his abilities that far surpassed her own. She felt a twinge of jealousy, knowing Stormspirit was a younger warrior, and padded onward, determined to please her mentor with her assessment.

She reached the more wooded area of the swamp, where there wasn't as much mud to wade through. Shaking droplets from her thick pelt, Scarpaw opened her mouth slightly to try and catch any scents she might've missed. There was nothing besides the damp air and the prey in her jaws, so with a twitch of an ear, she padded onward towards the camp, assuming she would catch up with Stormspirit on her way back.

Scarpaw froze on the path, blinking as a strong scent washed over her, pulling her away from her thoughts and grabbing her attention. She shut her eyes to try and latch onto it, finding it to be quite familiar, comforting...

Stormspirit!

Opening her eyes to scan the nearby undergrowth, she noticed his scent was moving quickly, making it hard to track. Left? Right? It was too difficult to tell... Bushes rustled behind her, but before she had a chance to turn around, something heavy landed on her back, knocking the breath right out of her, holding tightly onto her with sharp claws and jolting her with a shock. Scarpaw yowled, thrashing about, trying to throw her attacker with no avail; the claws only dug deeper. Thinking fast, she rolled to the ground, crushing the cat under her, jumping back into a fighting stance to face her attacker. His sleek grey coat was tattered and disheveled, but his yellow eyes gleamed with amusement.

"Quite a fight you put up there, Scarpaw. I almost had you."

Scarpaw twitched the tip of her tail, her green eyes glowing wide. "Stormspirit, please don't scare me like that! You made me drop my prey."

Stormspirit sat and licked his dirty paw, running it over his ears. "Oh, yes. The muskrat. It was an excellent catch," he shook his pelt, "however, I would suggest going for the legs next time; if you miss or falter, they'll fly back into their holes faster than a scared rabbit."

Scarpaw twitched her tail against the marshy ground. "Where were you? I couldn't see or smell you at all!"

Flicking his ears, Stormspirit smiled, looking pleased. "You were too focused on catching the muskrat that you disconnected from your surroundings. It was a good thing you were keeping your attention on it, but you must learn to be open to all the scents around you, to be able to spot unfamiliar cats or unwanted company. Your determination is strong, but make sure to not allow it to blind your senses. Without them," he flicked an ear, "we wouldn't be cats, would we?"

Scarpaw sighed, padding over towards her catch, which was thrown in the battle, to pick it back up. "Thank you, Stormspirit. I'll work on that." she had a hint of irritation to her voice, but Stormspirit knew it was aimed towards herself, so he brushed it off.

"Don't fret, Scarpaw. It took me many moons to become a warrior, as it will for you." He lifted his head to sniff the air, shutting his eyes against a cool breeze. "It's such a nice day out, with new-leaf finally here. Shall we hunt together some more before returning to camp? You can work on your tracking skills."

Scarpaw's eyes lit up, excited for the new challenge. She dropped the muskrat and dug up nearby dirt to cover it so she could return for it later, keeping it hidden from anything else passing through the marsh. With a wave of his tail, Stormspirit leapt over a nearby log, dashing off in search of more prey, with Scarpaw right on his heels.

Stormspirit was right, she thought. With new-leaf finally here, there would be more prey emerging from their holes and dens to relish in the new warmth and growth. The territory around her was familiar and full of memories, despite Scarpaw being born in Mapleclan. Many of Scarpaw's past was now shrouded in thick fog,

paling in comparison to her busy life here, training as a loyal Rainclan apprentice. As far as she was concerned, she might as well have been born here, surrounded by the thick marshy woods and cypress trees, stretching high towards the sky above.

She bounded off, passing Stormspirit with an amused yowl, occupied by her warm thoughts and hopes for the upcoming season. There were plenty of prey to catch, and at the call of a nearby black bird, Scarpaw felt herself pushing even further into the woods ahead.

Chapter 2

[image]

After a successful hunting trip, the two cats bounded through the dense bushes and shrubs leading towards their camp with jaws full of prey. Scarpaw had difficulty catching the scent trail leading home, but she remembered the way back, scent or no scent. They reached a small murky stream running near some thorny bushes and stopped to mark their scent on the trail.

"We're almost there. Not much farther now," Stormspirit mewed. The two continued along their way home, bounding through their marshy territory. Scarpaw felt the cicada songs vibrate through her chest, the buzz of insects in her ears, and felt at peace. Any time spent exploring Rainclan territory was cherished deeply by the apprentice. Out here, she could really be herself; back at camp, things were more complicated.

When the two cats finally reached the mangroves guarding around RainClan, they were exhausted. It had been a long sprint. Scarpaw slipped under a large mangrove root, leading into a large grassy clearing; RainClan. Most cats were chatting in the middle of the clearing, while some were milling around the dens. It was mid-day, and most of the morning patrols had already returned.

Stormspirit nudged Scarpaw with his nose. "You can keep that muskrat; it was an impressive catch. Go and eat, you deserve some rest." Scarpaw nudged him back affectionately, and went to drop the other prey she had caught in the fresh-kill pile. She noticed with a prickle of pride that it was unusually full.

Taking the muskrat, she then bounded off towards the apprentice den. It was tucked under an over-hanging tree trunk, with vines growing around it acting as a curtain. Thick bramble surrounded the sides, and the floor inside dipped down into a small ditch, with moss layed out on the floor for nests. Scarpaw pushed her way inside to find it was empty.

The others must still be out training, she thought. She sunk down

into her bed of moss, sighing to herself with relief. Her paws ached from today's training. Scarpaw quickly ate her muskrat, then closed her eyes to rest.

"Scarpaw. Scarpaw, I swear, you better wake up! There's a meeting." Scarpaw's eyes flew open to see Leopardpaw, her friend, looking down on her, her eyes wide against the curtain of vines above them.

"Eh, huh? Meeting?" Scarpaw yawned, scrambling to her paws as Leopardpaw scratched at the ground.

"Yes, a meeting. Snowstar recieved a message from Starclan and he's about to announce it to the clan!"

"Starclan?" Scarpaw looked past her spotted friend to see a crowd forming at the front of camp.

"*Yes!* Maskpaw told me earlier, while you were sleeping. He heard it from Sagefur who heard it from Webear while she was talking with Suntail, er, something like that... Now come on, come on!" Scarpaw's mind began racing with curiosity as the two she-cats ran out of the den towards the rest of the clan. There was a large tree stump surrounded by stones where they held their meetings. Snowstar, the clan leader, was just emerging from his den as they bounded up. It was a small cave made by the ancient stones behind the stump, surrounded with overhanging moss and vines. Scarpaw's tail twitched in excitement as Snowstar nodded, leaping up onto the stump, his bright white fur shining against the rays of the sun.

There was no need for formalities seeing as how the majority of the clan had already made their way to the Half-tree with eager eyes, yet Snowstar was a cat of tradition, and spoke the familiar words regardless. "Cats of RainClan, gather underneath the Half-Tree for a clan meeting." The elders were the last to make their way towards the Half-Tree, their ears turned towards Snowstar

curiously. The clan deputy, Suntail, leaped onto a flat stone underneath the Half-Tree, and nodded at Snowstar. He returned the gesture, sighing.

"Last night, during my patrol with Suntail," she flicked her ears, "I recieved a message from StarClan." Murmers broke out within the clan. Leopardpaw turned her head swiftly towards Scarpaw, whispering, "See, I told you!" Leopardpaw opened her mouth to speak more, but stopped when Snowstar flicked his tail for silence. His expression seemed grim.

"There is a darkness forming itself in this forest. Evil stalks the shadows beyond the marsh, coming from the two-leg territory past Thornclan. I saw a cat being driven off of a cliff by black, ferocious monsters. Starclan spoke, and the voices burned through my ears. They said, "blood, or clan.'"

Scarpaw heard Rosegaze, a nearby queen, howl, "Why has Starclan abandoned us? Do they wish to see us driven out, injured? What about our kits? Are we safe?" Other cats began to join in with her panic, when Snowstar yowled for silence. All eyes stared at him, the scent of fear hanging strong in the air.

"I am not yet sure what it means, but I am certain that it is not the wish of StarClan for suffering to be cast upon our kits." The queen gulped, her amber eyes wide but understanding. Snowstar looked back to the clan. "Yes, it is true that Starclan has been quiet. There has been many questions and few answers. This trouble with Thornclan as all of us looking over our shoulders, but we must not lose our senses; This is a blessing in disguise, warning, a message from Starclan meant to make keen our eyes through this coming darkness. Our ancestors are wise. Starclan is on our side. We mustn't lose our faith!" The crowd of cats sat nervously listening, all ears turned upward at their leader. His icy gaze beamed against the harshness of his coat. Scarpaw gulped, seeking strength in the sight of her leader.

"Until Webear and I have a better understanding on this message, there will be more border patrols. Two in the morning, one in the evening, and two night patrols. Do not worry; I will make sure we are safe for whatever dangers are to come our way."

With one last flick of his tail, Snowstar leaped off of the Half-Tree, and the meeting ended. Webear came padding up to him from the edge of the crowd, and the two walked off to her den, speaking in hushed voices so Scarpaw couldn't make out what they were saying.

Leopardpaw turned to face Scarpaw, her ears flat. "What do you think thats all about? Do you think he just had some kind of nightmare?" Scarpaw rubbed against her friend in affection.

"Im really not sure. It sounds like theres more than Snowstar wants to let on. All I know is that were safe here. Nothing can harm us so long as we keep a keen eye and a strong spirit."

"Do you really think that?" Leopardpaw mewed softly. Scarpaw looked into her friends worried eyes, hesitating for a moment.

"Dont worry about it too much; maybe this is something Snowstar must work out for himself. Maybe, it has nothing to do with us. Besides, we have becoming warriors to worry about."

Leopardpaw nodded, and brushed dirt off her spotted pelt. "Come on, let's go and see if the other apprentices have returned yet. And speaking of, I want to hear all about your solo mission." Scarpaw twitched her ears in agreement, and headed back to their den. However, even though she tried to stay calm for her worried friend, the message Snowstar had told them still hung heavy in her mind. What could it possibly mean? Could it have anything to do with the fact that Scarpaw wasn't born in RainClan?

Chapter 3

[image]

When the two she-cats made it to the apprentice den, the other apprentices had arrived; Sparkpaw, Woodpaw, and Maskpaw. The three young toms were sitting together outside the den. *Probably discussing the message*, Scarpaw thought. Maskpaw turned to greet them, his eyes filled with mischif as usual.

"Hey, Scarpaw. What did you think of that meeting? Scary, huh?"

Scarpaw's tail twitched in annoyance. She could already see how this conversation would go; Scarpaw had originally been born in MapleClan, but her father, Swifttail, had died protecting her and her sister, Hawkkit, after Thornclan led an all out attack over border strife. RainClan appeared at MapleClan's side to help defend them before they lost their territory to the tyrant leader of ThornClan, Pebblestar. Snowstar knew Swifttail well and offered the two kits a place in his clan. The two sisters never knew their mother, and were told she had died during birth, The queens of Mapleclan had never shown much affection towards the two she-kits, and Scarpaw was mystified by the great leaders kindness, following him to train to be a loyal RainClan cat and escape the horrors she had faced that night; while her sister, Hawkkit, was horrified by her sisters betrayal, staying in MapleClan to bring honor to her father.

Maskpaw had never trusted her since the day that Snowstar had brought her to the clan, no matter how hard Scarpaw tried to prove to them all where her heart truly belonged.

Scarpaw cooly looked into his eyes, trying to hide her rising frustration.

"Yes, it was. I wonder what it means."

Maskpaw didnt seem done. "Blood or clan... Rosegaze thinks It's about some disaster befalling us or our kits, but I think It's about something else entirely. Don't you have a sister in MapleClan? I

wonder, Scarpaw... have you ever thought of going back?" Scarpaw flattened her ears.

"What are you trying to say, Maskpaw?"

Maskpaw snorted, sneering at her. "You know exactly what I mean. We cant trust you; you're an outsider! Obviously, Starclan is trying to warn us about outsiders. Didn't you hear the message? You even have a mark of your old clan." Maskpaw lashed out his paw, hitting Scarpaw's large gash on her left hind leg with his sheathed paw, shocking her. She responded with a nasty hiss; Maskpaw liked to pick on the younger apprentice, but this was going too far. That scar was from the battle her father died in, after a ThornClan warrior burst into the nursery, managing to strike not only Scarpaw, but other kits as well. The Thornclan warrior striked a powerful slash down her hind leg, leaving the deep scar that gave Scarpaw her name before being fought off. While she remembered very little of the attack, the cats around her never let her forget; her scar was an ugly reminder of where she was born, and the misfortune that follows her. It also reminded Scarpaw of her father, who died in order to keep Scarpaw and her sister out of harm.

Scarpaw yowled in anger, unsheathing her claws and preparing to slash. "If this scar bothers you so much, how about I give you one to worry about?" before she could leap, Sparkpaw stepped inbetween them. His yellow pelt prickled in anger as he glared at Maskpaw.

"Maskpaw, you're being ridiculous. Don't you have any sense at all? You know Scarpaw would never betray RainClan. Her loyalty lies with us, and she has proven that much to us enough times over. Stop acting like a kit."

Maskpaw spat in anger. "You're a fool if you really believe that, just like her. I don't care what any of you think. Things would be much easier without her around." he got up to stalk into the apprentice den, his tortoiseshell pelt standing on end. Woodpaw, who had been standing nearby looking terrified, followed him.

She turned to Sparkpaw and sighed. "Thanks. You didn't have to say any of that." Sparkpaw turned to face her, his blue eyes calm.

"I said it because It's true. Don't worry about it, Scarpaw." He flicked his tail, and padded away towards the fresh-kill pile. Scarpaw watched him go, letting out a deep sigh. The soft spoken tom had always been kind to her since she had joined the apprentice den, which meant a lot, since Maskpaw wasn't the only cat in the clan to share the thought that she didn't belong. From elders to kits, she could always feel pairs of eyes on her while moving around camp.

Leopardpaw sneered. "Maskpaw, what a mouse-brain. I mean, who really thinks that? Of course this prophecy has nothing to do with *you!* I mean, come on! Scarpaw involved in some dark and gloomy prophecy? Doesn't any other cat think Snowstar could've just ate some rotten squirrel?"

Scarpaw huffed in annoyance. "Gee, thanks for helping me out there! I would've pounced on Maskpaw if Sparkpaw hadn't shown up."

Leopardpaw shrugged. "I didn't know what to say! Plus, I didn't think you would really leap at him. Did he really bother you with all that nonsense?" Scarpaw sighed, licking her chest fur to smooth it back down.

"Well, yeah, I suppose. I would never betray the clan... My heart lies here." Leopardpaw nudged her with her nose.

"I know that. Come on, let's go inside the den; my paws are aching from training today, and my nest is calling my name." Scarpaw got up to leave when Suntail bounded over to them, signaling to Scarpaw with her tail. Scarpaw's ears flicked in surprise.

"Scarpaw, SnowStar would like to see you in his den."

Scarpaw gulped down her panic before mewing, "O-Okay! Ill go see him now." Suntail nodded, and walked past them without another word. The two apprentices exchanged glances, then Scarpaw swiftly bounded off towards SnowStar's den, pressing her ears flat against her head. Maskpaw's words rang harshly throughout her mind.

Chapter 4

Scarpaw hesitated in front of the Half-Tree. SnowStar's den layed just behind, formed from ancient rocks and stones to create the cave where he resided. Even though she had been inside many times before, the gaping darkness from the overhanging rocks still intimidated her. Snowstar must have smelled her presence, because she heard his meow signaling her from inside, interrupting her thoughts. Scarpaw gulped, then padded around to the back. Strings of lichen hung around the cave, and she pushed her way cautiously inside. The floor dipped down to make a cozy living space. Snowstar layed near the back, his tail curled neatly around his paws. His eyes were tired, but thoughtful- aged by many moons of hard work and nasty battles. Scarpaw bowed her head, her neck fur rising in anticipation.

"Snowstar? Did you need me?" He flicked his tail towards a sandy spot close to where he was laying.

"Please, sit." Scarpaw slowly lowered herself onto the soft soil. SnowStar's white fur was matted, as if he hadn't groomed it in moons. Scarpaw winced at how weak her leader looked in the sheltering darkness of his own den, never before realizing his age.

Snowstar noticed her reaction and let out a deep sigh. "Scarpaw, you must listen. In no way do I doubt your loyalty to this clan. I have raised you here, and watched how you learn; and I believe that you are truly a RainClan cat." His icy eyes flashed suddently. "But, my vision is worrying me. As the leader of this clan, I must take procautions. Instead of where you usually train, near the river, you will now train near the mud-hollow on the opposite side of our territory." Scarpaw's eyes widened. He was changing her training grounds because the river was closest to MapleClan; he was worried about her visiting her home-clan!

Scarpaw was stunned, but she held her toungue. SnowStar searched her face. His icy stare peirced her heart; this cat had practically raised her. Was he now skeptical of her loyalty to his

clan, too? Scarpaw took a deep breath, then nodded. Snowstar flicked his ears.

"I have already notified StormSpirit. Oh, and he told me of your assesment. I'm interested in how much you've improved these last few moons; maybe I will asses you sometime aswell." This brightened Scarpaw's spirits slightly. The idea of her great leader seeking intrest in her training made her glow with pride.

"Thank you, Snowstar. I would love that." Snowstar leaned over and licked her in-between her ears as a sign of affection. Scarpaw purred and pushed closer to his fluffy coat. He almost felt like a father.

Father. Painful memories of her kit-hood shot through her like a thorn. Scarpaw pulled away, looking into his eyes again. He lifted his chin.

"Do not take this personally, Scarpaw. You must understand that these are dark times for our clan. We had a harsh leaf-bare, and we face a large threat of invasion from ThornClan after assisting MapleClan during their attack. We must be careful, and listen to the messages StarClan gives us. Do you understand?" Scarpaw nodded, dazed with wonder and confusion. She had no idea ThornClan would still be angry about that, when it happened so many moons ago. But she understood. He had to do whatever he could to protect his clan.

Snowstar stood, looking down on the young apprentice. She shook her head to clear the thoughts clouding up. "Thank you, Scarpaw. That is all. You should go; I believe Stormspirit is waiting for you." Scarpaw blinked. Maybe he had news of their next training session?
With one last flick of her tail, Scarpaw left the den, turning back into the camp clearing. The sun was starting to set on the trees, casting a heavy red hue on the entire camp, and the evening patrol then came bursting through the camp entrance, Stormspirit among them. The cats padded into camp, tattered and bloody. They had cuts and patches of fur missing from various wounds. Stormspirit had one eye closed, with blood dripping down his cheek. Scarpaw stood, watching in horror, as other cats emerged from their dens to

face the same shocking sight.

Snowstar also emerged from his den to welcome the patrol, but his ears flattened and his eyes grew wide when he saw his warriors. Suntail, the leader of the patrol, limped forward. She had a gash down her side; not life threatening, but bloody.

"What has happened?" Snowstar yowled. Suntail looked into his eyes, her sides heaving.

"ThornClan cats... Met them on our border, near the Great Lake." Snowstar thrashed his tail angerly back and forth.

"ThornClan? On our border?" He seemed lost in thought for a moment, then snapped back to reality.

"Webear! Hurry, we have injured warriors!" In a moment, the clan medicine cat sprinted from her den, surrounded with nettles and bramble near the Half-Tree, towards the patrol. Her shiny black coat stood on end, as the rest of the clan started milling out from their dens. Webear looked around at the cats, then nodded to herself.

"Quickly, come to my den! I can heal these wounds. Quickly!" The patrol slowly made their way to Webear's den, looking defeated and exhausted. Tension hung in the air as everyone was anxious to hear what had happened, but their questions would have to wait. The patrol of warriors was badly injured. Scarpaw looked across the camp to see Sparkpaw looking at her, deep worry on his face. His mentor, Pepperpelt, was among the warriors as well. But what worried Scarpaw the most was what Snowstar had told her in his den. Was this ThornClan's sign that they were planning to attack their camp?

Chapter 5

After what seemed like an entire moon, the patrol cats made their way out from Webear's den. Most of their wounds were covered up and healing, but Stormspirit's eye was still closed, looking puffy and infected. Scarpaw gulped, worried it may never open again. She realized with another shock that Pepperpelt was not with the warriors who came out of the den. The four warriors who did walk out were Stormspirit, Venomsight, Toadface, and Suntail.

Pepperpelt must have serious injuries... Scarpaw thought. She could see Sparkpaw searching frantically, asking the warriors where she was; but the patrol of cats ignored him, and slowly made their way to the front of the Half-Tree. His questions would have to wait. The patrol sat close together, while Snowstar and Suntail took their places, with Snowstar standing tall on the top. The whole clan watched in silence, waiting for someone to speak. Suntail raised her chin.

"Cats of RainClan, we come with proof that ThornClan is hunting on our territory." Snorts and hisses were heard from the crowd below. Scarpaw pulled her lip back a bit to show her teeth, anger spreading through her veins. Suntail continued.

"We have had suspicions before, but now, there is no denying it. I led my warriors towards the Great Lake, to inspect our scent markers. There were scents of ThornClan far beyond their borders, as well as scattered crow-food." Snowstar hissed next to her, his tail lashing out. Leopardpaw made her way over to stand next to Scarpaw, her ears flat against her head. Scarpaw looked into her friends eyes to see that they were clouded with rage.

"We were about to turn home when we saw three ThornClan cats, hunting near the edge of the lake. We ambushed them from the undergrowth, and won. No lives were lost from either party, but you can rest assured we gave them some wounds to think about." The cats below yowled in agreement; the elders were chuckling to themselves from the back of the crowd. Suntail's eyes narrowed.

"But they hurt Pepperpelt badly. She has a large cut on her underbelly, as well as her chest. She is with Webear now." A pained yowl sounded from the crowd; probably Sparkpaw. He is close with his mentor. Scarpaw tried to find him, but there were too many cats. She sat back down. "I have discussed this with SnowStar already." She bowed her head as SnowStar stepped forward, ready to address the clan.

"ThornClan will pay for hunting in our territory, but now is not the time. We have few warriors, and our apprentices need more training. Tomorrow at the gathering, we will discuss this battle, but for now we will not attack. We must wait for the right moment." Some cats grunted in frustration, while others nodded in agreement. Scarpaw was one of them; She was unsure weather their clan was ready for an attack with the great ThornClan just yet. SnowStar waved his tail, ending the meeting. He padded off to Webear's den, Sparkpaw following him. Leopardpaw snorted loudly.

"We should be attacking now! We have enough warriors. How dare ThornClan hunt in our territory, when they have the whole flat-lands! I cant wait to get my claws on some of those warriors." Scarpaw twitched her tail.

"Leopardpaw, were not ready for an attack. SnowStar is right; we should wait till we have more warriors. Think about it. we've been training for almost ten moons now. Soon, you could be battling them as a warrior." Leopardpaw's eyes lit up, and she nodded.

"Your right. *Then* I'll give them something to be afraid of." Scarpaw shrugged, feeling uncomfortable about the whole situation, and decided to head to the apprentice den. It was moon-high, and Silverpelt shone brightly in the sky above. But suddenly Sagefur, a young warrior, came running out from the medicine cat den. His tawny fur stood on end, and his eyes were clouded with misery. He lifted his head high and yelled,

"**Pepperpelt is dead!**"

Chapter 6

That evening, the camp elders carried Pepperpelt's body to the middle of the clearing, where the entire clan shared tongues with their old friend for the last time. Scarpaw had only spoken to the pretty warrior a few times before, and she nealed down towards her, filled with guilt and dismay. She nudged the brave warriors lifeless body, taking in her sweet scent; it was already fading into the surrounding smells of the marsh.

"Im sorry I didnt get to know you very well. Sparkpaw spoke highly of you after every training lesson, and he seemed to respect you very much. You must've been a great warrior." Scarpaw opened her eyes and stood, looking to her right. Sparkpaw was curled up against his fallen mentor's side, un-moving and stunned by grief. Scarpaw wanted to stay to comfort her friend, but she felt as if doing so would be intrusive. Scarpaw simply brushed up against him in support, and made her way back to the den, her paws feeling heavy. The sun was starting to set on the tree's, and Scarpaw could see a single star glowing softly amid the pale sky.

As the night winds blew through the leaves of the apprentice den, Scarpaw twitched restlessly, watching the nightsky with wide eyes. Sparkpaw was still out in the clearing with Pepperpelt; he would most likely stay there all night. Leopardpaw layed motionless next to her, deep in slumber. The other apprentices were asleep as well; but Scarpaw did not feel the familiar tug of slumber. She was overwhelmed by the emotions and tensions of the day, and there was so much on her mind. Why had the ThornClan warriors killed Pepperpelt in a simple border attack? Surely they didnt intend to?

Scarpaw flicked her ears. It could be that this was planned-

ThornClan was fierce and cold, often cutting corners to achieve their success; they did take after ShadowClan, one of the great ancestral clans, after all. But what was their purpose? Did they want to irritate RainClan to attack? Surely they couldn't afford a declaration of war?

Then there was the message from StarClan that Snowstar had recieved. Scarpaw couldn't help but wonder if it was about her family ties with MapleClan. She had never felt any longing for her birth clan from the very day she chose to leave; her heart lies with RainClan. She hadn't even seen her sister, Hawkpaw, since the day she had left MapleClan as a young kit. Maybe she was wrong, and the message wasn't about her after all. Any of the clan leaders could've recieved the message; there were simply too many possibilities.

After a long time of thinking, sleep finally caught up to Scarpaw, as she drifted off into a dream-less slumber.

Scarpaw awoke with a jolt. The sun was just starting to shine through the thin leaves, and she could smell the fresh dew resting on the grass outside. It must be early.

She looked to her left to see Sparkpaw curled up in his moss bed, twitching restlessly. *He must be having a nightmare*, she thought. Before Scarpaw got up to leave, she softly nudged her nose to his pelt. When he stopped twitching, she made her way out into the clearing to stretch.

Most of the clan were still asleep, but some warriors were chatting near the soft-ground outside the warriors den. She recognized Stormspirit, and rushed over to check on her mentor, anxiety suddenly flowing through her veins.

"Stormspirit!" He turned his head to see her running towards him, whiskers twitching. There were two large scars over his left eye, but it seemed to be working fine. *Thank StarClan,* she thought, *he must've had his eye closed when they striked*.

Stormspirit smiled weakly, a distant haze in his eyes. She could tell he was trying to hide his despair. "Scarpaw, hello! Its good to see you." Scarpaw rubbed under his chin, purring loudly. She had been worried sick about her mentor since he had arrived at

camp, bloodied and beaten.

"I'm so glad you're okay. You looked as if you may not make it to Webbear's den." Toadface, another warrior sitting behind him, twitched his tail.

"We're fine." Toadface's voice was raspy, and his dark eyes flashed. Scarpaw knew she hit a sensative spot; the two warriors had been apprentices with Pepperpelt.

Scarpaw bowed her head. "I-I apologize, I was just so worried." Stormspirit smiled and flicked his tail, dismissing his friends anger.

"Thats alright. Thank you, but were tougher than you think; those mouse-brained ThornClan cats were so afraid of us, they ran back to their clan with their tail tucked between their legs." Scarpaw chuckled at his words, but she could see Toadface's eyes flash behind him. Stormspirit must be bluffing.

She smiled and stood. "Well, Im glad your eye is alright." Stormspirit nodded, the distant look in his eyes slowly clouding up again. Scarpaw turned towards Toadface and nodded her goodbye. The old warrior looked at her through narrowed eyes. His jaw was twisted from many past battles, with warts and patches of scared skin and missing fur all over his face. She looked away, trying to hide her surprise, and headed back towards the apprentice den, where Leopardpaw was padding out the entrance. Scarpaw greeted her with a soft mew.

"Morning, Leopardpaw. Sleep well?" Her friend yawned, reaching behind her ear to scratch.

"It was alright, I suppose. You?" Scarpaw sighed.

"I had trouble sleeping, with everything thats been happening lately. First the message, now Pepperpelt..."

Leopardpaw sighed. "I feel the same way. Maybe today's training lesson will help take your mind off things." Scarpaw nodded, exited to train with Stormspirit again. It was still early in the morning, and training wouldn't be for a while. Scarpaw and

Leopardpaw groomed eachother as they waited for whatever lessons their mentors had planned.

Chapter 7

Eventually Owltail, Leopardpaw's mentor, had come along to take her off to training. Scarpaw was left alone by the apprentice den, laying on the soft ground and staring at her paws. The wind that blew around her was warm, but she felt so cold. So much was on the young cats mind, that she almost didnt notice Sparkpaw calling her name. She looked up to see her friend walking towards her. His eyes were tired but he smiled at her, flicking his ears.

"Scarpaw." She smiled back, greeting him with a twitch of her whiskers.

"Sparkpaw, hey! How are you?" The yellow tom sat next to her, letting out a low sigh.

"Im fine, thanks. Just tired; It's been hard to sleep."

She nodded, relaxing. "Im having the same problem."

"Really? What for?" Scarpaw looked up at the sky, watching the birds fly high above. "I cant help but wonder if SnowStar's prophecy has to do with me being born in MapleClan. What if StarClan is testing me? But on the other side, what if the prophocy isn't about me? Is our clan in danger?"

Sparkpaw leaned down and licked Scarpaw's ear. "Scarpaw, I wouldn't worry too much about it. Im sure were all fine. Maybe its not as big as we think. Plus, you're a member of RainClan; I know you're loyal to us. Don't let what Maskpaw said get to you." Scarpaw shut her eyes, letting out a deep breath. Maybe he was right; maybe it wasnt as big as she was making it out to be.

The two apprentices sat together in silence until Stormspirit padded up to them, flicking his tail.

"Great, you're already here! Ready for training, you two?" The two apprentices looked at eachother, confused. Sparkpaw looked back at Stormspirit.

"We'll be training together today?" Stormspirit's eyes softened. "Yes. SnowStar asked me to take on both of your training until you recieve a new mentor." Sparkpaw twitched his ears, and nodded silently. Scarpaw winced.

There was an awkward silence between the cats. Stormspirit shifted on his paws.
"Right. Well, we should get going. The Mud-Hollow is a bit far from camp." Scarpaw groaned, still annoyed at having to train in that horrid place, but got to her feet and followed Stormspirit out of camp, along-side Sparkpaw. At least they got to train together.

As they were leaving, she caught the cold eyes of Maskpaw staring at her from the fresh-kill pile. He was watching her intently, holding a mouse tight in his jaws. Something in his expression made her blood run cold. She stared back at him until he grunted, turned around and took his mouse to the apprentice den. Scarpaw gulped, gathering her speed, and bolted out of the ferns after the two cats.

Stormspirit led the two apprentices through the thick undergrowth and soggy grounds of the RainClan territory. The mud hollow was located a bit past the Great Lake; a monumental place for the RainClan cats. The mud hollow, however, was quite the opposite. It was the farthest away from MapleClan, while quite close to ThornClan. All apprentices of RainClan dreaded the mud hollow- it was damp, hot, sticky, and difficult to wade through unlike the clear stream that she was used to. While RainClan cats were accustomed to mud and water, the mud there sits in a large ditch, thick and untouched, making it a major pain to get out of fur.

Scarpaw twitched her ears. The group was still sprinting through thick territory, the ground underneath their paws getting soggier as they ran. At some spots, she felt her paws sink slightly when they touched the ground. Sparkpaw shot her a glance, sharing her discomfort. They would be grooming their pelts for weeks.

"Here we are!", Stormspirit announced. They bounded into the hollowed ground, breathing heavily. In the center of the hollow was a small ditch, filled to the rim with thick, hot mud. Stones jutted out from inside like the claws of a drowning cat, looking slippery and dangerous. Scarpaw gulped, but when she looked towards Stormspirit, his eyes were sparkling. He loved training lessons.

"So. Today, we will be practicing on these stones. RainClan cats are known for our abilities to move quickly in wet terrain. I want you two to leap from stone to stone, without falling in the mud below. You need to learn how to easily move around in difficult circumstances." The apprentices gaped at him. He sat, grinning.

"Sparkpaw, you will be going first." Scarpaw looked to her friend. His eyes were locked onto Stormspirit's, showing determination. He seemed so confident.

"Alright." He padded over to a stone low to the edge of the ditch, and leapt onto it. His paw pads slipped, but he made sure not to lose his balance. He looked up at the next stone, which was a bit higher then the one he was standing on. He then crouched low, raised his haunches, and leapt.

Scarpaw shifted on her paws uncomfortably, worried for Sparkpaw. She could tell he was focused, but with each leap his back legs slipped slightly, and it took him a while for him to regain himself again. Stormspirit was watching him closely, but it was hard for her to tell what he was thinking. The scar over his eye made her wince; It made Stormspirit seem so different. Ever since Pepperpelt's death, she noticed a change in Stormspirit; in everyone. Especially Sparkpaw. She turned her attention back to his training.

Sparkpaw was almost finished. He flicked his ears, lept up to the next stone, and tried to find a place for his paws. But Sparkpaw took his eyes off the rock at the last moment, missing it with his back paws and then slipped completely off into the mud. He scrabled to the edge, shaking his fur and hissing. Stormspirit sighed.

"So close... But not close enough. You'll need to keep your eyes on where your landing until the very end. We'll practice more, but now, it's Scarpaw's turn." Scarpaw gulped, looking at Sparkpaw. He

was still shaking his fur, ears flat. He nodded, sitting down to clean himself, as Scarpaw slowly made her way to the first stone. She watched it intently, raising her haunches in preparation.

"Whenever you're ready," Stormspirit mewed. She flicked her ears in response.

Taking one last deep breath, she leaped upward onto the rock. She instantly felt herself slipping, but regained her balance before sliding off into the mud pit below. Gulping, she met eyes with Sparkpaw, who was watching her with fierce eyes. He seemed to be silently cheering her on. Twitching her tail, she surveyed the next rock.

"Come on, Scarpaw, too slow! You must learn to adjust quickly in difficult situations. Go! Leap!"

Surprised, she jumped forward, landing with a thud on the next rock. Standing, she jumped again, making sure to focus. With every leap her paw pads slipped slightly off the edge, but she continued jumping from rock to rock as quick as possible while still remaining swift and steady.

She took one more leap, anticipating the smaller stone a bit too much- sliding a bit to the left. She un-sheathed her claws in surprise, wincing as they scratched the wet surface, and jumped off the stone landing on the grass, right as her body slipped to the side. Although her landing was sloppy, Scarpaw grinned, relieved she wasn't cleaning mud out of her pelt right now.

"Nice job, Scarpaw. A bit sloppy, but we'll work on it. Come on, Sparkpaw, get ready. You're up."

He groaned, still covered in thick mud as he slowly made his way over to the starting position. Scarpaw thought she heard the tom cursing Stormspirit's name under his breath.

Chapter 8

The next morning Stormspirit had summoned the two apprentices for hunting practice, and they couldn't be more relieved to get away from the dreaded Mud-Hollow. Scarpaw could barely sleep after their rigorous training. It took so long to wash the mud out of her pelt. She could sense Sparkpaw shared her discomfort, and now the group of three were returning to camp, carrying fresh prey in their jaws to feed the clan. It was a warm day, and prey in the mangroves were bountiful. Scarpaw was considering going back out to hunt as she slipped under the massive roots leading into the clearing, until she was suddenly jolted out of thought, almost bumping into Stormspirit as Woodpaw came pounding up to her. His tail was held high, and his eyes seemed to gleam slightly as he mewed a welcome to the patrol.

"Scarpaw, hi! How was hunting?" She blinked, flicking her ear in greeting as she gestured for him to walk with her to the fresh-kill pile where she dropped her catch.

"It was successful, we all were able to find plenty of prey." Woodpaw nodded, captivated by her words. Scarpaw shuffled her paws, knowing she needed to take prey to the elders but was held down by Woodpaw's excited badgering.

"Venomsight will be assessing my hunting skills tomorrow," he mewed, "do you have any suggestions on where I should look for a decent catch?"

Scarpaw was about to make a remark about how he knew the territory himself, but before she could even get a word out, she was interrupted by a shrill hiss coming from the apprentice den. Maskpaw stood, glaring at Woodpaw, thrashing his tail side to side. Woodpaw flattened his ears, looking back to Scarpaw and whispered, "Sorry. I'll talk to you later," before bounding off to his side. Scarpaw's fur prickled in anger, but she simply spat, grabbed a

plump mouse from the pile and stalked off to the elders den. She had kept them waiting long enough, and she needed something to keep herself from ripping Maskpaw's tortoiseshell pelt to shreds.

"Took you long enough," groaned Coldclaw, one of the elders laying in the den. Scarpaw bowed her head respectfully, dropping the plump mouse in the center of the four elders.

"My apologies, the training session took longer than expected. We were able to catch plenty. I can bring more to you, if you'd like." Coldclaw was already chewing on his piece of the mouse as he spat, his dark matted fur prickling slightly.

"Don't bother with excuses. They mean nothing to me. And don't try to overfeed us, either. We're plump enough." Scarpaw shuffled awkwardly as another elder, Fawneyes, shook her head towards Coldclaw.

"Oh, don't mind his temper, Scarpaw. I'm starting to believe that old mound of fleas just loves to hear himself complain." Scarpaw twitched her whiskers in amusement as Coldclaw spat once more, turning away from the cats.

"We'd appreciate some more fresh-kill, if you dont mind. Enough to share between Deadmouth, Slowcloud and myself." Slowcloud sat close to Deadmouth, his eyes soft and welcoming. Deadmouth seemed quite the opposite; his muzzle was scarred and disfigured, sickeningly twisted to one side. She shifted her attention back to Fawneyes, and nodded.

"Of course. I'll be back in a rabbit's leap." Taking off towards the pile, Scarpaw grabbed a woodpecker and a muskrat, and turned to go back into the den when she was suddenly stopped by a yowl coming from behind her. Turning, Scarpaw was confronted by Venomsight, a large dark warrior who's strange eyes burned into her own like tiny flames.

"Where do you think you're going with all that prey, apprentice?" He growled. Scarpaw blinked in surprise, dropping it to speak.

"Ah, Fawneyes requested I bring her more fresh-kill for the elders to share... Coldclaw took the mouse I had brought them, and the rest of them still needed food." Her voice sounded small under the stare of the looming warrior, who she had only spoken to a few times. She knew he was Woodpaw's mentor, and suddenly felt a pang of pity for him.

Venomsight opened his mouth to say more when Slowcloud emerged from the elders den, his pale fluffy coat puffed out.

"Scarpaw, could you please hurry? We're beginning to get hungry, and Coldclaw is complaining again." She gave a quick nod of respect to Venomsight before collecting the prey and bounding off to the elders. It might've been her imagination, but Scarpaw thought she heard a growl about Mapleclan come from the larger warrior's mouth as she left.

"Thank you, Slowcloud." Scarpaw mewed as she offered the prey to the other three elders. He grinned.

"Of course. I've been around here long enough, so I know that warrior. Venomsight seems to enjoy messing with you poor apprentices." Scarpaw saw a glint of amusement in Deadmouth's eyes, but he said nothing. Fawneyes finished her woodpecker, and yawned, licking her lips.

"Thank you, Scarpaw. You may leave us." Nodding once more out of respect, Scarpaw made her way out of the shady den and into the clearing where she stretched. Seeing Leopardpaw emerge from the apprentice den from across the clearing, Scarpaw mewed a greeting and padded over to her friend.

"Hello, Leopardpaw. How was training today?" The spotted cat seemed excited.

"It went well. But nevermind that, have you heard the news?"

Scarpaw blinked, confused by Leopardpaw's sudden enthusiasm."I don't believe so, what news?"

"It's about Sparkpaw. Snowstar's naming him a new mentor

soon, and rumor has it that its going to be old Toadface!"

Chapter 9

By the time the sun had risen to the center of the sky, the gossip surrounding Sparkpaw's naming ceremony had spread throughout the clan. The morning patrol had returned, padding wistfully through the camp entrance, Sparkpaw among them. Not long after the cats had shared their reports with Snowstar, the white leader yowled the familiar words, announcing a meeting. Scarpaw padded quickly to the Half-tree, Leopardpaw close behind, as the clan watched in anticipation.

Toadface was known throughout the clan for his vicious temper, and wretched looks; even though Scarpaw knew it wasn't the old tom's fault, she couldn't help but feel her pelt prickle any time he casted a grumpy glance her way. He certainly made sure the apprentices feared him, and he wasn't very popular with the other warriors, either. Scarpaw sent a silent prayer to StarClan that the rumors weren't true as Snowstar twitched his tail, beginning the meeting.

"It is time Sparkpaw received a new mentor," he mewed. "Sparkpaw, please step forward." Scarpaw saw him padding to the foot of the Half-tree, sitting calmly with his tail wrapped neatly over his paws. Snowstar gazed upward for a few moments before raising his head.

"Toadface will be his new mentor." Sparkpaw's eyes flashed for a moment, but his expression was hard to read. Scarpaw saw Leopardpaw's whiskers twitching in amusement next to her, but Scarpaw couldn't help feel a pang of pity for the yellow apprentice. He cared deeply for Pepperpelt, and the harsh atmosphere surrounding the older warrior would surely be a difficult adjustment.

"Toadface, it has been many moons since your last apprentice, and you have plenty of experience to pass on to this young cat. Will you swear to teach him all he needs to learn, and mold him into the

great warrior in which he shows potential to become?" Toadface padded to the front, standing near Sparkpaw and bowed his large head towards the great leader.

"Yes, Snowstar. It is an honor." Snowstar nodded, and the clan cheered. Toadface bent to touch noses with his new apprentice, but it was awkward and sloppy. Scarpaw noticed Sparkpaw's tail twitch with discomfort as he pressed close to Toadface's mangled muzzle.

"Just as I predicted," Scarpaw could hear the elders chatting near the back of the crowd, Coldclaw speaking loudly with his usual hint of arrogance. "Snowstar chose the right cat. Maybe Toadface will teach him some respect- the apprentices these days just don't have what we once did." Fawneyes hushed him with a quiet hiss, but the other elders sat silently, seeming thoughtful. They shifted their attention back to the Half-tree quickly however, when Snowstar yowled to get his clan's attention. Scarpaw followed their gaze, realizing with a jolt that tonight was the gathering. Ears pricked toward the leader, Scarpaw sat close to Leopardpaw, both she-cats buzzing with excitement.

"Tonight is yet another gathering, and it has come time to announce the patrol that will be joining me at Sky-Rocks tonight." Even Coldclaw held his tongue, anticipation running through the crowd like an electric current.

"Suntail, Webear, Stormspirit, Nightbreeze, Toadface, Venomsight, Scarpaw, and Woodpaw." Scarpaw's pelt prickled at the mention of her name, excitement bursting from her mouth in the form of a quiet squeal. Leopardpaw nudged her with her paw, a glint of mischief in her eyes.
"You lucky fur-ball!" she said playfully. Scarpaw laughed, nudging her friend back. "My first gathering! Oh, Leopardpaw, can you believe it?" The spotted she-cat sighed, but her eyes still smiled.

"I sure can. You deserve it, Scarpaw. I only wish I could share the experience with you." Scarpaw pressed her muzzle to her friends cheek affectionately.

"I know. Just think about it, you might be able to go next time as a warrior." Scarpaw's words made her friends ears prick up,

brightening her spirits.

"I sure hope you're right. Now come on, let's take our fresh-kill to the elders den so we can eat. Old Coldclaw will rake my hide if I don't hurry." Scarpaw twitched her whiskers in amusement, and followed her spotted friend as Snowstar dismissed the clan and the crowd started returning to their previous duties.

After feeding the elders, the two she-cats sat together by the apprentice den, sharing a woodpecker. Sparkpaw came bounding up, Woodpaw behind him. Maskpaw was nowhere to be found.

"Hello, both of you." Sparkpaw mewed, seeming tired. Woodpaw smiled at Scarpaw, but said nothing.

"Hey, Sparkpaw. I'm sorry about the ceremony," Scarpaw said, flicking her tail. He smiled.

"Don't be. Toadface may be unpopular, but he's a great warrior. I respect him." She blinked, feeling a sense of guilt. She had assumed things of the warrior based off of rumors and looks. Leopardpaw noticed her embarrassment and purred, flicking her ear.

"Well, I say good luck. You'll need it. I heard he overworked his last apprentice pretty harshly." Sparkpaw looked to her, nodding, then gazed towards Sagefur at the end of the clearing. He was Toadface's last apprentice, and while he was a great, well-rounded warrior, Scarpaw always noticed a sense of anxiety surrounding the dusty tom.

"Well, I'll just have to work that much harder, then." Admiring his spirit, Scarpaw smiled. Woodpaw stepped slightly forward, his eyes glittering.

"I can't wait to join you at the gathering, Scarpaw. It'll be your first, right? Me too." She blinked at him, surprised.

"Yes, It'll be interesting. Especially with the recent prophecy, I wonder if Snowstar will address it to the other clans." Sparkpaw looked back to her, softness clouding his eyes. A secret

understanding passed between the two cats for a short moment- an understanding that Scarpaw was nervous of encountering the clan she had abandoned as a kit, MapleClan.

"Don't worry about it too much," Sparkpaw mewed. "Sky-Rocks is far from here. You two should make sure you're well fed and rested before you have to travel."

Woodpaw nodded, padding away to the fresh-kill pile, and Scarpaw rested her head on her paws, shutting her eyes against the sunlight. Pushing the worries of MapleClan and her sister away, Scarpaw let herself drift off into a nap.

Chapter 10

"Scarpaw. Scarpaw, get up!" A strong paw padded the apprentice awake with a jolt. Scrambling into a sitting position she recognized her mentor, Stormspirit, looking down on her in amusement.

"The patrol will be leaving for Sky Rocks soon. I assume you got some food in your belly before dozing the day away?" Scarpaw blinked, looking around. The sun was beginning to set behind the trees, and the cicadas were singing loudly throughout the marsh, signaling dusk. Scarpaw shook her pelt, shuffling her paws in the dirt.

"Sorry, Stormspirit. I have a full belly, I promise- I guess I didn't know how tired I was," she muttered. Stormspirit flicked his ear, smiling softly.

"It's alright. You've put up with some tough training in the Mud-Hollow these last few sessions; I'll be speaking to Snowstar soon about moving your training back near the stream." Scarpaw's eyes glowed, purring excitedly.

"Could you go find Woodpaw?", Stormspirit mewed, "we need all patrol cats ready to leave. I believe Snowstar will be wanting to get to the Sky Rocks as soon as we can." Scarpaw nodded, leaving her mentor to search for the small brown apprentice. Woodpaw's affections towards Scarpaw were quite obvious, yet she had barely spoken to him at all since she was apprenticed in RainClan. He clung close to Maskpaw's side, and the tortoiseshell tom spat insults at her whenever he could. Seeing Maskpaw sitting alone near the Half-tree, Scarpaw padded up, her head held high. Maskpaw sneered as she drew closer, but she ignored him, staring defiantly in his narrowed eyes.

"Maskpaw, have you seen Woodpaw anywhere? We need to get ready to leave with the patrol soon." Maskpaw spat, sitting straight.

"No need to remind me about the gathering, Scarpaw. Just know you're only going because Snowstar doesn't trust you. Who knows what you'd do, here in the clan without him to watch over you like a lost little kit?" Scarpaw fought the urge to tackle him there, taking a deep breath.

"Save your breath. I just want to know where Woodpaw is." Maskpaw snorted, turning away from her.

"I don't know. Find him yourself." Her pelt prickling in annoyance, Scarpaw spun away, letting frustrations guide her. She had finally been chosen to attend the gathering, with Stormspirit's help no doubt, yet Maskpaw still didn't trust her loyalty to RainClan. Scarpaw was sure no cat had worked as hard as she had to be a true RainClan cat, yet every time she felt truly accepted, Maskpaw ruined it with his insults and sly remarks. "*Someday*," she thought, "*he'll see. I'll* prove *my heart lies here, with RainClan*."

Blinking herself out of a daze, Scarpaw realized her paws had led her to the entrance of the elders den. Slowcloud was sitting close by, Deadmouth laying close to his side as usual. Fawneyes and Coldclaw lay asleep, tucked close to the thick bramble encasing the den.

"Scarpaw, is everything alright?", Slowcloud mewed, eyeing her in surprise. She twitched her tail in embarrassment, bowing her head.

"Sorry, Slowcloud. Everything is fine. I'm looking for Woodpaw; we will be leaving for Sky Rocks soon, and no cat seems to know where he is." Deadmouth raised his head slightly, light gleaming in his eyes. Slowcloud twitched his ears.

"Actually, Deadmouth and I caught sight of him leaving camp with Venomsight earlier. They could be out training still." Scarpaw nodded.

"Thank you, Slowcloud. I'll go search for them now." As she turned to leave the den, Slowcloud sat up, mewing to get her attention.

"Before you go, Scarpaw, I wanted to say that I'm proud of you. No cat can deny that you deserve to be going tonight." The sudden praise made her paws warm, and she stared wide eyed at the elder as he continued.

"However, I warn you to stay watchful. With the recent prophecy, many cats will be on edge at this gathering, including Venomsight. Your loyalty to us is clear, but that cat has a few thorns in his pelt- he'll be watching how you react to your birth clan. Don't give him a reason to be skeptical of where your heart lies." Scarpaw stood silently, in shock. The wise elder had just confirmed her worries, yet she had never voiced them to any of these cats. Looking to Deadmouth, laying at his side, Scarpaw saw something in the old tom's eyes that made her blood run cold, but his expression was partially hidden in the shadows of the den. Nodding, Scarpaw slowly backed out of the den.

"Thank you, Slowcloud. I won't," she mumbled, padding back into the clearing.

The patrol was waiting for her at the camp entrance, Venomsight and Woodpaw among them. Padding up to the brown apprentice, Scarpaw noticed the only cats missing were Snowstar, and his deputy, Suntail.

"Woodpaw, where were you? I was looking all over camp for you," Scarpaw sighed, still slightly dazed by her encounter in the elders den. Woodpaw's eyes flashed slightly, his expression hard to read.

"Venomsight and I were just training. It took longer than expected," he quickly mumbled. Eyeing him curiously, Scarpaw decided not to press him any further. Her own nervousness about the gathering was enough, and she needed to keep herself calm. Stormspirit appeared at her side, licking in between her ears.

"What's with that expression? You're starting to look like Toadface," he purred, "tonight will be wonderful, I promise. Gatherings are always a mystical experience, even for old warriors like me." Nightbreeze came padding up, a hint of amusement in her eyes as she looked at Stormspirit. Scarpaw recognized her as Maskpaw's mentor.

"This fur-ball always gets excited over Gatherings. But he's right, you know; it's an honor for apprentices to join the patrol. Try to show some gratitude." Scarpaw bowed her head, intimidated by the warrior. With a prickle of discomfort, Scarpaw realized that her apprentice, Maskpaw, had not been invited to the gathering while she was.

Just then Snowstar emerged from his den with Suntail following close behind, both neatly groomed and eyes gleaming. Snowstar addressed his patrol, nodding in approval. There was a moment of silence while all cats watched him intently, eyes shining against the dark hues of dusk, until Snowstar grunted, padding toward the entrance.

"Right. Follow me," he yowled, and sprinted out of the thick mangrove tunnel.

Chapter 11

As Snowstar led the patrol deep into RainClan territory, Scarpaw's nervousness was slowly taken over by excitement. She couldn't help but relish in every scent, each leaf crunching under her paws. On her first training session as an apprentice, Stormspirit and Owltail had taken Scarpaw and Leopardpaw on a tour of the territory, teaching them the best hunting spots and familiarizing the she-cats with their clan's borders; never before had Scarpaw ventured as far as she would tonight, surrounded by her clan-mates. She felt a sudden jolt of pride, causing her pelt to prickle slightly against the pulsing wind.

Stormspirit appeared at her side, his powerful muscles pushing in sync with Scarpaw as his eyes gleamed in the darkness.

"The territory here must seem unfamiliar to you. Pay attention, Scarpaw. What can you smell?" Opening her mouth to the air, Scarpaw hesitated before scrunching up her nose in disgust.

"Thats ThornClan!" she exclaimed, suddenly feeling anxious. Her surroundings were very unfamiliar, and the sudden indication that they may be headed into enemy territory set Scarpaw on edge.

"Yes. This is the quickest path to Sky Rocks; we must travel the far edge of the Great Lake, avoiding the stretch of land near MapleClan but drawing us near ThornClan's borders." Scarpaw stared up at her mentor in shock, trying to keep pace with him and the patrol.

"What if we were to run into their patrol? Surely ThornClan wouldn't allow us to pass through so easily?" Stormspirit's expression changed, his yellow eyes focused forward.

"On the night of a gathering, a Clan's patrol is allowed to step foot on another's territory in order to reach Sky-Rocks, as said in the Warrior Code. ThornClan wouldn't dare question the word of StarClan." Scarpaw nodded, looking around them. The patrol was

now padding through thick undergrowth, and not far to their left Scarpaw could see the ground dip down into the shore of the Lake through the bushes. She could barely make out the opposite shore in the darkness, but for a moment she thought she could see pairs of glittering eyes staring back at her through the bramble. She tried to see them clearer, running closer to the edge, but they vanished just as quickly as they had appeared.

"Stormspirit, what's past the opposite shore of the Great Lake?" she breathed, still watching through the bushes.

"That is MapleClan territory," he mewed calmy, "the large Maples surrounding the shore signal where our side of the lake begins and ends, along with theirs." Scarpaw nodded, still focused on looking through the bramble. The strange eyes she had seen still had her attention as she felt Stormspirit's nudge as he whispered, "Come now, were falling behind. Sky Rocks isn't much farther."

The stench of ThornClan was getting heavier in the air as the patrol began to veer away from the Great Lake's edge, now padding through even more unfamiliar territory. The grass had started to thin out, and there were less trees to cover them as the cats pushed on. Scarpaw could see bushes and patches of skinny trees in the distance, guessing the ThornClan camp had to be nearby, but kept pace with the rest of her clan-mates as they continued their journey. They were lucky enough not to encounter an enemy patrol, and even though the Warrior Code declared peace on the night of a gathering, she was unsure of ThornClan's dedication to the code's rules. They had killed Pepperpelt over a border attack, and even though there was no proof it was intentional, all RainClan cats believed her death was planned. They would be meeting tonight, and Scarpaw couldn't help but wonder if Snowstar would address the recent attack on his warriors.

Scarpaw could feel the anticipation of the cats around her, guessing they were close. The pace quickened through the thick undergrowth until they reached the edge of a ravine, dipping down into a large clearing surrounded with flat stones, getting larger closest to the center. The rocks near the front were raised and jagged, pointing high up towards Silverpelt like newly sharped claws. Looking towards the center of the clearing, Scarpaw could

see a small pool of water, still and untouched; the rising moon was slowly becoming visible in its reflection, and she prickled in anticipation when she realized it wouldn't be long now before the moon would be in the center of the sky, and the Gathering would begin.

Snowstar crouched at the front of his patrol, gazing down into the clearing silently. Scarpaw saw groups of cats mingling below on the flat rocks, recognizing the scents of both ThornClan and MistClan. MapleClan had not yet made it. Taking a few more glances, Snowstar flicked his tail to signal to his patrol, then bounded down the ravine into the clearing. Shuffling their paws to avoid the pool of water in the center, the RainClan cats immediately split off to mingle with the other clans. Stormspirit padded to Scarpaw's side, Toadface with him. The two were friends since their apprenticeship, and Scarpaw wondered how many Gatherings the two had shared.

"Here we are, Scarpaw. Until the moon appears in the center of this pool, you may go and meet cats from other clans as long as you stay inside of Sky Rocks territory. Once the moon rises however, the Gathering will begin, and you must find your way back to the RainClan patrol." Scarpaw nodded excitedly up at her mentor as he sighed, a gleam of pride in his eyes.

"Your first gathering... You deserve this, Scarpaw. Try to enjoy it." He turned away with Toadface, both already disappearing in the crowd of cats as Scarpaw looked around. She noticed a small group of apprentices sitting up on a flat rock, Woodpaw among them. He summoned her with a flick of his tail, and she bounded up, bowing her head towards them respectfully. Two smelled strongly of MistClan, and one from ThornClan. None showed any sign of hostility, which calmed her nerves as Scarpaw sat close to Woodpaw.

"Welcome! We hear this is your first gathering," the ThornClan apprentice mewed, "mine as well. I'm Quickpaw." Scarpaw flicked her ear towards the calico apprentice.

"Hello. My name's Scarpaw, and this is Woodpaw." The two MistClan apprentices stepped slightly forward, a white she-cat with pale eyes nodding at Scarpaw while the other, a larger tom, sat

silently.

"Woodpaw already caught us up. I'm Dovepaw, and this is Bushpaw. Welcome to Sky Rocks." Woodpaw smiled, twitching his whiskers in response and Scarpaw did the same. She couldn't shake a prickle of discomfort from speaking so calmly to cats from another clan, and the mingling scents surrounding Sky Rocks confused her.

"Is MapleClan here?" she asked, "I don't smell them anywhere." Dovepaw shook her head, looking towards the pool.

"No, I havn't seen them at all. It won't be much longer until the moon rises to the center of the sky, surely they don't intend to be late?" Bushpaw grunted next to her.

"They'd be bringing the wrath of StarClan onto all of us."

Before Scarpaw could respond, a familiar scent caught her attention like a thorn. She looked around frantically, trying to pinpoint where it was coming from, when she saw a crowd of cats bounding down the opposite side of the ravine. Their eyes seemed to glitter in the moonlight as they stumbled to avoid the pool, leaping onto the flat stones to greet the other clans. With a jolt Scarpaw recognized Tanglestar leading them, her head held high as her piercing eyes challenged the cats before her. She settled near the jagged rocks, sitting beside Pebblestar, the leader of Thornclan. Snowstar was sitting nearby with Crowstar, Mistclan's leader, as they both bowed their heads in respect. Tanglestar ignored them.

"As expected of MapleClan," Woodpaw snorted, "they'd be late if StarClan themselves came down and declared a meeting." Scarpaw was too stunned to acknowledge his comment. She couldn't take her eyes off of their sleek coats, feeling her own paws move her towards the crowd.
"I'll be back," Scarpaw mumbled, leaving the other apprentices to join the larger group of cats below. The moon was almost in the center of the pool, and she didn't have much time- Scarpaw had to know if her sister, Hawkpaw, had been among the MapleClan patrol.

Chapter 12

Running through the clearing, Scarpaw carefully searched each cat, however she wasn't exactly sure what she was searching for. It had been many, many moons since she last saw her sister; right before they were apprenticed, in fact. Scarpaw's memory of Hawkpaw was faded and hazy, like a distant dream. There was too much time inbetween the two cats, and each step brought more uncertainty. The last time she had seen her sister, Hawkpaw was furious at her for betraying their birth clan. Her sister wanted nothing to do with her, and Scarpaw feared her sister's resentment towards her had not yet dissolved.

Turning a corner, Scarpaw caught hold of a sickeningly familiar scent; it sent a cold chill of anxiety through her body, yet also filled her heart with joy. It was her sisters scent, from somewhere nearby- Hawkpaw was here!

However she was too late, because right at that moment a shrill yowl sounded from the highest stone in the center of the clearing. All chatter in the clearing quickly faded as the four great leaders stood from their point near the jagged stones, gazing down at all the clans with eyes that glittered like they were made from stars. Crowstar stepped forward, his lean black pelt shining like silver under the full moon. Scarpaw's joy turned to frustration as she quickly made her way towards the rest of RainClan, who were gathering near the center of the clearing, and abandoned her hope of finding Hawkpaw in the clearing.

"Cats of all clans, it is an honor to stand here tonight before you and begin this Gathering." Every cat's eyes were turned towards him as he spoke, anticipation silently rippling through the crowd.

"New-leaf has been generous to us, and prey thrives in the fields..." He went on to describe the everyday wellbeing of his clan, including a new litter of kits being born. There were respectful nods and murmering throughout the crowd, and once he was finished Pebblestar stepped forward. His massive size made the other leaders seem small, and his cold gaze struck Scarpaw to the core. She had

heard stories of the great leader from warriors and elders, but had never been so close to see him in the flesh. Remembering this was the leader who had led the attack on her home-clan that resulted in her fathers death, Scarpaw felt her fur prickle and she sent a silent prayer to ScarClan that she would never have to face this monster of a cat on the battlefield.

"Cats of all clans, I speak for the needs and wellbeing of ThornClan as a whole. Last leaf-bare was vicious to us, sweeping heavy winds throughout our open plains and killing the undergrowth, resulting in scarce prey. For my clan, this new-leaf brings heavy challenges rather than prosperity." He glanced at Crowstar, who was watching with steady eyes. Snowstar and Tanglestar stood silently, listening with pricked ears but keeping their eyes forward. Pebblestar looked back down into the clearing.

"We've come to ask Snowstar, as well as the cats of RainClan, for hunting rights on their edge of the Great Lake." Before Pebblestar had finished his proposal, yowls and hisses of protest broke out among RainClan below, including Scarpaw. Snowstar's neck fur rose as well, but he kept his mouth shut, letting Pebblestar finish. He had nothing left to say however, and Snowstar took a heavy step forward, a glint of fury in his eyes but his voice steady. "You feel the need to ask, Pebblestar, after we already caught your hunting patrol on our territory?" A few hisses of protest sounded from the crowd of ThornClan cats, but Snowstar was not finished.

"My warriors found scattered remains of crow-food around the lake, and not long afterwards your patrol murdered Pepperpelt in cold blood. What reason do I have to give you a share of our precious hunting grounds, when we struggle enough with feeding ourselves?" There were other sounds of shock throughout the clearing from many different cats. Pepperpelt was popular throughout all the clans, and her death must've come as a shock to not just RainClan, but the entire forest. Scarpaw could see Stormspirit's hackles shaking in pure fury near the front of the crowd, the deep scars over his eye reminding her of the heavy pain he must still carry and the importance Snowstar's words must hold for her mentor.

Pebblestar's eyes were small slits, glaring darkly at the older

leader. Scarpaw could see Quickpaw crouched with ears flat across the clearing, hissing with fury at Woodpaw, who showed the same hostility. The two had been so friendly before, and now it seemed as if in a single moment they could slash eachothers throats.

"Pepperpelt's death was unfortunate, and ThornClan grieves for her loss. I ask for hunting rights peacefully, as a plea to you, Snowstar. My clan is going hungry, and our Queens have little milk." Snowstar's ears flattened against his head as he turned to stare Pebblestar in the eyes defiantly.

"You seem well fed yourself, Pebblestar, for a cat leading a hungry clan."

Thornclan's deputy, Eelstrike, stood hissing venom up at Snowstar, "Your mind must be fading as quickly as your strength, you old flea-bag!"

Venomsight broke from the crowd of RainClan cats to stalk menacingly towards him, claws unsheathed. Nightbreeze stopped in front of him, hissing, keeping the two apart before they leapt on eachother. The entire clearing seemed to erupt in chaos, cat turning on cat. Scarpaw felt a rising panic that a fight would break out any second, but it was then that thunder broke loudly across the sky, shaking the stones and casting fearful silence through the crowd. Dark clouds threatened to cover the moon, and each cat watched, no one daring to move until the clouds slowly parted and the thunder became a distant growl, reminding each cat of their peaceful truce.

Pebblestar spoke first, "I'll let you think on my words, Snowstar, and expect an answer at the next gathering. StarClan has shown they wish to leave the topic undiscussed for now."

"Yes, and MapleClan has yet to be given their turn," Tanglestar spat, her tail lashing in anger behind her. Snowstar bowed his head in respect, but it didn't seem to calm her frustrations at all.

"My apologies, Tanglestar. You may speak."

Snorting in defiance, Tanglestar began with updates on Two-legs spotted in the forest, and plentiful growth thanks to new-leaf. The dense forest of maple trees and bramble the MapleClan cats called home was an ideal spot for a clan, with plentiful prey and shade, and Tanglestar made it her business to tell every cat about it. Scarpaw's attention started to falter as she messed with a small stone under her paws and smoothed down her rising chest fur. Even with the peaceful truce declared by StarClan on the night of a Gathering, the previous quarrel reminded her of how fragile the peace really was. One cat could summon the wrath of StarClan with a single swipe of their paw. It was Tangelstar's final words, however, that shook Scarpaw from her state of anxiety about the quarrel with ThornClan.

"I'm also proud to announce that one of our apprentices, *my* apprentice, has become a warrior. She will now be welcomed as Hawkheart, a noble and courageous warrior our clan is proud to have." Mews of respect broke out through the cats, but Scarpaw could only gape up, eyes wide. She instantly scanned the crowd to find MapleClan parting, revealing Hawkheart in the center, staring proudly up at the high stone where her mentor stood. Cats were calling out her name, and Scarpaw joined in, a warm happiness creeping from her paws to her tail tip. Her sister had become a warrior, and a strong one, too. Her muscles showed through her thick pelt, and Scarpaw found herself bounding towards the crowd to try and get close.

"Hawkheart!", she called, hoarsely trying to reach her sister through the crowd."Hawkheart, here!"

The lean she-cat looked around, obviously startled by Scarpaw's voice, and their eyes met for a moment that felt like a whole moon. Hawkheart's expression was difficult to read. Scarpaw could see shock, confusion, and a hint of something she couldn't describe hidden deep in her amber eyes. When Scarpaw tried to push closer however, her view of Hawkheart was blocked by an overwhelming crowd of MapleClan cats. Their scent was confusingly familiar to her, and she felt uncomfortable at how friendly she felt around these strangers. Hearing Woodpaw's voice from behind her, Scarpaw fought every urge to push through the crowd and turned to

the brown apprentice, still dazed. He looked at her with determination.

"Scarpaw, what are you doing? Come on, apprentices have to stay close to their mentors while the leaders are speaking." She could tell he was worried about Venomsight, and nodded, following him back towards the RainClan patrol, dragging her tail in disappointment. She had missed the last of Tanglestar's announcements, and Crowstar was calling the Gathering to an end. Snowstar exchanged one final threatening look towards Pebblestar before bounding down the high, jagged stones to join his clan. His fur was slightly ruffled, and he stalked to the center of his patrol as the other clans prepared to leave.

"Suntail, Webear, join me in the front as we go back to camp. Everyone else, follow me- we're going home." He burst through the bushes, the rest of the clan climbing up the ravine after him, but Scarpaw stopped herself before following them into the thorny bushes. Gazing across the clearing to where MapleClan was disappearing through the bramble, she caught sight of Hawkheart standing alone on a flat stone near the small pool. The two sisters locked eyes, and Scarpaw took in the sight of her sister as much as she could. They looked so much alike, it was almost like looking at her reflection in a puddle after a morning shower. Hawkheart's amber eyes burned into Scarpaw's, who returned the stare with a deep longing hidden in her own green slits.

Without a single flick of her tail or a twitch of her whiskers, Hawkheart turned and ran off through the thick bushes, leaving Scarpaw alone under the full moon, feeling lonelier than ever before.

Chapter 13

A few days had passed since the gathering, and Scarpaw's training had moved back near the river like Stormspirit had mentioned. Clan life seemed back to normal, the only possible threat being ThornClan cats in their territory; However the RainClan patrols kept a close watch on their side of the Great Lake, so far finding nothing but their own scent markers, which they renewed as often as possible according to Snowstar's orders. Scarpaw's training schedule had shifted from hunting and stalking to fighting techniques, and Stormspirit often brought Owltail and Leopardpaw along to train together. Scarpaw enjoyed the company of her friend, and days went by smoothly. The encounter with Hawkheart at the gathering still stung like a fresh wound, but Scarpaw managed as best as she could to bury it deep down for another time; there were more important things for her to be focused on, and she'd have other chances to see her sister at gatherings- she'd just have to wait.

Leopardpaw and Scarpaw had been practicing their fighting moves on eachother at the Black Tree, a sandy clearing open to the rays of the sun along the river, where the skeleton of an ancient tree stood, black from the strike of lightning. It was an old elders tale that a ferocious cat unlike themsleves, with massive claws and flat ears once lived under the tree and terrorized the cats of RainClan. StarClan had sent lightning to strike the tree, killing the monster who lived underneath and saving the clan from its terror. Stormspirit had recited the story the entire training session, and Scarpaw had laughed, telling him he was almost like an elder himself. It was afternoon now, and the two she-cats lay exhausted outside the apprentice den, sharing tongues in the afternoon sun. The clearing had been lazy all day, and Scarpaw saw Dawnleaf, a young queen, slowly make her way out of the nursery with two bright-eyed kits stumbling out after her. They shared their mothers soft coat, and Scarpaw smiled as one of them, a pale tom, batted

playfully at a leaf falling close to his nose. Sagefur watched warmly from the warriors den, sharing fresh-kill with Owltail, and Scarpaw guessed with amusement that he must be the father.

"A healthy litter of kits is always a good omen," Leopardpaw mumbled sleepily as Scarpaw reached around her friend's ears to wash.

"That young tom looks like he'll grow into a strong warrior. I hope they can be our apprentices, if were made warriors soon." Scarpaw nodded, glancing at the young tom's sister, who had bounded over to join her brother in attacking the flimsy leaf. They did seem to hold some potential, with their long legs and ears. The idea of becoming a warrior and getting an apprentice of her own filled Scarpaw with excitement, and she stopped washing Leopardpaw's pelt to rest her head on her paws, relishing in the thoughts of leaving the apprentice den behind to join the warriors.

"No more picking ticks out of Coldclaw's pelt," Scarpaw mewed with a twitch of her whiskers, and Leopardpaw let out a snort.

"Or putting up with Venomsight's nasty temper." Scarpaw looked across the clearing to see the dark warrior, stalking past the kits with an unreadable expression. He watched the young tom quite intently, his strange eyes catching the attention of Dawnleaf, who called for her kits near the nursery's entrance. Venomsight must've noticed, since he bowed his head respectively and padded off, out of the camp's entrance. There was a dangerous atmosphere around the quiet warrior that Scarpaw didn't quite understand, and again she felt a prickle of pity for his apprentice.

"I can't imagine dealing with him as my mentor every day," Scarpaw said as she shook her head, "I'd claw my fur off. How Woodpaw does it, I have no clue." Leopardpaw seemed thoughtful.

"Woodpaw's always been a soft-paw, but he's dealt with it long enough. I've been worried about him recently, though; something seems a little off with him. Have you noticed?" Scarpaw flicked her ears. She *had* noticed something off about Woodpaw, but with everything that had happened lately she didn't have much time to dwell on any of it. Looking around, it occurred to her that she had

not seen Woodpaw or Maskpaw all day. Nightbreeze was missing too, meaning Maskpaw was probably still out training; but Woodpaw was still gone, and Venomsight had been here all afternoon.

"Woodpaw seemed a bit off before we left for the last gathering," Scarpaw mumbled almost to herself, "but I was too overwhelmed at the time to ask him. He seemed anxious to please Venomsight too, but thats just normal Woodpaw, right?" Leopardpaw shrugged, uncertain.

"Who knows? Maybe Venomsight has an assessment planned for him. I would be anxious too if I had a cat like that to please." Leopardpaw yawned, obviously dismissing her worries as she rolled onto her side, but Scarpaw couldn't shake a discomfort that there was something darker going on right under her nose.

Night had fallen in the marsh, and the last of the patrols had already returned, curled up in their mossy nests. Scarpaw was wide awake, staring up at the sky above while listening to the soft sounds of a distant owl. All the other apprentices were asleep; except Woodpaw, who still had not returned after Venomsight. Scarpaw had expected his mentor to pad through the camp entrance with his apprentice, but Venomsight returned holding fresh-kill in his jaws, alone. No one seemed to notice Woodpaw's disappearance, or if they did, no cat was worried- except Scarpaw, who couldn't control her tail tip from twitching in frustration. Unable to stand it any longer, she poked Leopardpaw with her forepaw to wake her.

"Leopardpaw. Leopardpaw, wake up," she hissed, desperately trying to wake the heavy sleeping she-cat and not the rest of the apprentices. Her friend blinked lazily, seeming irritated.

"Scarpaw, if you're having a nightmare, you cou-"

"Its Woodpaw," she interrupted harshly, "he isn't back yet. No cat seems to notice, not even Venomsight. Something isn't right."

Leopardpaw sat up at her words, still yawning. "What do you suggest *we* do about it, then?"

"I... I think i'm going to go out and search for him." Leopardpaw's eyes widened, staring into Scarpaw's own with concern.

"You can't be serious. Sneaking out of camp? Scarpaw, tell me you're not serious." When Scarpaw didn't break her determined gaze, Leopardpaw sighed.

"You're serious. Oh, dear StarClan, I can't let you go by yourself." Scarpaw let out a breath of relief.

"Thanks, Leopardpaw. With any luck, we'll find him safe, and sneak back into camp without any trouble. No cat will know we ever left." Seeming unconvinced, Leopardpaw flattened her ears.

"Whatever you say. Come on, we should hurry. Wherever that fur-ball is, he's probably not close. I don't want Owltail to wake for a dawn patrol to find me missing." Scarpaw nodded, doubt biting away at her own confidence.

"Right, Stormspirit, too. If we follow the Great Lake, we could get a good look around heavy territory without wasting much time."

When Leopardpaw nodded, Scarpaw stood, making sure to avoid the sleeping apprentices in the den and headed out towards the camp's entrance with Leopardpaw a tail length behind her. She kept telling herself the small brown apprentice was out there somewhere, safe and sound- but she couldn't shake an icy fear that wherever he was, he was in danger.

"Come on, this way," Scarpaw whispered, quickening her pace. The two she-cats burst through the thick undergrowth side by side, and headed straight towards the Great Lake.

"We'll find him," Leopardpaw mewed, noticing her friends nervousness. Speaking under her breath, she added, "And when we do, I'll make sure this is the last time he decides to interrupt my precious sleep."

Chapter 14

Before the two she-cats had even neared the lake's edge, Scarpaw had picked up on Woodpaw's scent trail. It veered them off their original course, sending them bounding through the more wooded growth of RainClan territory, near the river and the Black Tree. Scarpaw hoped that was where they'd find him; hunting or possibly going over his training alone, but her hope faltered as his scent led them past the Black Tree, nearing MapleClan's borders. Here the grass was lighter and large trees replaced the majority of bramble and mangroves Scarpaw was used to; she felt strange padding along the crinkly dark leaves, and she could tell Leopardpaw felt the same.

"What would Woodpaw be doing over here?" Leopardpaw hissed, worry making her aggressive. "I don't like being this close to the edge of our borders, especially near MapleClan. If we run into a patrol, were crow-food." Scarpaw nodded grimly, becoming more aware of her surroundings.

"Speaking of crow-food, do you smell that?" She scrunched her nose in disgust, stopping to try and get a better scent of the air. Leopardpaw did the same.

"Great StarClan, that reeks! It doesn't quite smell like crow-food, though; something different." Scarpaw silently agreed, trying to search her brain for what the wretched smell could be when she gasped, flattening her ears.

"I've smelled this before, on a patrol with Stormspirit. That's badger." Leopardpaw's pelt prickled, nodding.

"You're right; but it smells odd, as if theres something else..." Scarpaw followed the scent, stopping to point with her muzzle at what she saw ahead of her, hidden between thick bushes.

"Leopardpaw, look." Ahead of the two she-cats was an old badger set, long abandoned. It was crushed and flattened, as if

something had rolled around in it. Smelling the set carefully, Scarpaw faintly picked up on Woodpaw's scent mixed in, but it disappeared after that, completely overwhelmed by the wretched badger set's.

"He tried to hide his scent," Leopardpaw mumbled, "but why? And from what?" Unable to answer, Scarpaw stood, lost in thought. Anxiety made her neck fur stand on end as she considered the possibilities. They had no way to track him now, and wandering aimlessly so close to MapleClan's borders was too dangerous. The moon was already hidden below the clouds, and Scarpaw guessed it wouldn't be long before the early dawn patrol prepared to leave camp. A gasp from Leopardpaw interrupted her thoughts, and Scarpaw hurried over to her friend as Leopardpaw crouched, hiding herself between thick bramble.

"What? What is it?" Scarpaw whispered, unnerved by her friends behavior. Leopardpaw pulled her lip back in a snarl.

"Look; there he is!" Following Leopardpaw's eyes, Scarpaw saw the small shape of Woodpaw padding quickly along a large ravine, which dropped dangerously deep into a ditch filled with jagged rocks that made Scarpaw nervous. Any cat to fall in the ravine here would surely be impaled. To cross into MapleClan territory, a cat would have to walk along the ravine until it thinned out enough to safely cross the expanse of jagged rocks below.

The ravine lined the border of MapleClan, and Scarpaw could see the thick forest of their territory on the other side. Woodpaw kept glancing behind him anxiously, and he seemed to be padding back and forth, almost like he was waiting for someone. Before she could say anything, Leopardpaw stalked out of her hiding space, her eyes two tiny slits. "Woodpaw!", she growled, "There you are!" The small brown apprentice jumped, his fur on end, seeming completely taken by surprise. Scarpaw bolted out of their hiding place after her, frustrated by her friends sudden outburst but flooded with relief that Woodpaw was here, unharmed.

"We've been searching for you all night! What in the name of StarClan do you think you're doing, so far from camp?" Leopardpaw lashed her tail around as she spoke, but Scarpaw didn't interrupt.

She too wanted to hear the apprentice's explanation. He blinked, almost as if he couldn't believe the two were actually here, flattening himself to the grass.

"V-Venomsight sent me," he mewed with concern, "I was slacking off during training, so he sent me to gather herbs for Webear as punishment. He said Burdock root only grew this far from camp." His eyes flickered as he spoke, not meeting either apprentice's questioning gaze.

Scarpaw stepped forward. "You've been out all day and night, have you been searching this entire time?"

He nodded, "Yes, but I haven't found any." Leopardpaw's fur lay flat again, but she still spoke with an edge in her voice.

"Great StarClan, why did you roll all over that badger set? You smell awful!" Woodpaw twitched his tail, still not meeting her eyes.

"A MapleClan patrol came by on the other side of the ravine; I didn't want them to notice me, so I disguised my scent." Scarpaw thought she saw a flicker of movement from MapleClan's side of the ravine, but Woodpaw walked forward, blocking her line of sight.

"Anyway, I'm sorry for worrying you. I know I shouldn't have stayed out so late, but I also knew Venomsight would have my hide if I didn't find that Burdock root." Leopardpaw let out a snort, sitting to lick a paw and run it over her ears.

"The only one worried was Scarpaw. She insisted we snuck out to find you; I just came along to help her." Woodpaw's eyes brightened at the mention of Scarpaw's plan, and she shuffled her paws in discomfort.

"Well, we should help you find some of that Burdock root," Scarpaw announced, changing the subject, "You could get in a lot of trouble, coming back to camp without any after so long." Woodpaw bowed his head in appreciation, and the three cats searched the edge of the ravine quickly. It didn't take them long to stumble across the large bush containing a fair amount of the herb, and Scarpaw couldn't help but wonder how Woodpaw had missed it.

There's no way, she thought, *he has to be hiding something.*

All three apprentices gathered a mouthful of the root, and sprinted back into camp, away from the dangers of the ravine and safe inside RainClan territory. As they made their way towards Webear's den, Scarpaw let out a sigh of relief to see that no cats were out of their dens yet. Scarpaw silently thanked StarClan for their luck.

"Thank you both for everything. I'll take the root to Webear, you should get some rest before training starts," Woodpaw mewed.

"Sounds like a plan to me," Leopardpaw murmured with her mouth still full. She dropped the root at his paws and padded off. Scarpaw watched until her spotted tail disappeared into the apprentice den before dropping her own herbs, giving Woodpaw a steady stare.

"Woodpaw, are you sure everything is alright? You've seemed a little shaken ever since the gathering," she whispered. He looked at his paws, ears back.

"I'm fine, Scarpaw. Please don't worry about me; Just go get some rest. And please, don't tell anyone else about this, okay? Our secret." She felt taken aback by his response, but he bounded off to Webear's den before she could reply. Discomfort heavy on her mind, Scarpaw slowly made her way back inside the den, wanting nothing more than to curl up in her own mossy nest. Sparkpaw lay asleep close by, and she shut her eyes, taking in his sweet scent.

Oh, StarClan, send me strength, she thought, as she let herself drown in the lulling sounds of the other apprentice's steady breathing.

Chapter 15

Scarpaw let out a loud battle cry as she swung herself forward, crashing into her target and dragging the battle down to the crisp grass. She wrestled Stormspirit with sheathed claws until she faltered for a moment, and he swatted her away with a heavy paw, causing her to roll sideways and get a mouthful of wet soil. Shaking her head, Scarpaw grunted in annoyance.

"Great job," Stormspirit chuckled, standing to shake stray grass off of his grey pelt. "Good thing you remembered to keep your claws sheathed this time, or I would've been crow-food." Scarpaw licked a paw to bring it behind her ear.

"Leopardpaw taught me that one. She says force is the key." Stormspirit nodded, shutting his eyes momentarily against the crisp breeze.

"She has a point. However, without stealth and strategy, force wont get you anywhere. Before power, outsmarting your enemy will *always* bend the fight in your favor." Scarpaw twitched her tail in agreement.

The two were out by the river going over usual battle training until Nightbreeze appeared from within the thick bramble, signaling towards Stormspirit with her long tail.

"Snowstar ordered me to call for you both. He says its urgent," she mewed, but her expression betrayed the seriousness of her words. Stormspirit blinked at her, then back at Scarpaw, shrugging.

"Come on, then. I suppose we've done enough of this for today; I don't want to keep Snowstar waiting, for whatever reason." Nightbreeze nodded, adding more warmly, "I can walk back to camp with you." Stormspirit seemed to brighten at her offer, and Scarpaw twitched her whiskers at her mentors reaction. The death

of Pepperpelt came as a heavy burden on Stormspirit, however he seemed to be growing stronger each day, and the presence of Nightbreeze only helped with his recovery; the bond between the two was very clear. Hurrying after the two through thick RainClan territory, Scarpaw tried not to let the urgency of the she-cat's message bother her. New-leaf was upon them, and the scent of green and growing things calmed the apprentice and filled her with renewed energy as she traveled on; even the distance sound of the river seemed to whisper encouragements of opportunity in her ears.

Before Scarpaw could squeeze through the thin entrance leading into camp, Venomsight pushed his way out, barreling her out of the way with a heavy thud. His pelt was pricked and his eyes were narrow slits as he stopped, turning towards the shocked apprentice who was now on the ground. He said nothing, and his annoyance only seemed to grow as he scoffed, and Scarpaw watched him stalk into the thick RainClan territory, out of sight. She blinked, shaking her head and getting back on her paws, staring surprised at the shaking bramble where the dark warrior had disappeared into. She cautiously padded through the camp entrance after hearing Stormspirit calling for her, still watching the marshy woods ahead. Venomsight's behavior only added more worry to her thoughts on Nightbreeze's urgent message concerning Snowstar.

Inside the camp, Dawnleaf and her kits were relaxing in the warm sun, and a few warriors were watching her from the fresh-kill pile. Woodpaw was picking at a skinny vole alone near the apprentice's den, not turning to greet her as she walked into camp. She remembered their last encounter with a twinge of anxiety. The apprentice's mood hadn't seemed to improve since her and Leopardpaw found him sneaking out of camp, and while the incident stayed between them, Scarpaw still noticed a growing distance between the two. Venomsight's raging temper didn't help, and Scarpaw still felt an unease that something was going on that she didn't yet understand.

As she padded further in, Scarpaw noticed Stormspirit, Nightbreeze, Toadface, Owltail, and Snowstar sitting together near the Half-tree, with Sparkpaw, Leopardpaw, and Maskpaw among them. Shaking away the incident at the camp entrance, Scarpaw

curiously bounded over towards the group. Snowstar welcomed her with a wave of his tail, and Leopardpaw and Sparkpaw also mewed friendly words of greeting. Only Maskpaw stayed silent.

"Welcome, Scarpaw," Snowstar started, "I apologize for interrupting your training sessions, you four, but I bring you here with more important matters." Scarpaw flicked her ears, and Leopardpaw shot her a confused look. Snowstar turned towards their mentors.

"These four apprentices have proved themselves many times over, and have shown great signs of courage and honor. I believe it is time for us to take a trip to the Stone-hollow."

Scarpaw's pelt stood on end, pride making her eyes light up against the warm sun rays. Leopardpaw squealed next to her, causing Owltail to shoot her a warning glance, and Sparkpaw and Maskpaw simply stared in happy astonishment. All apprentices from each clan had to visit the Stone-hollow before becoming a warrior, and it was seen as a great honor to make the journey alongside your leader. Stormspirit licked in-between Scarpaw's ears as the other mentors sat with pride.

"The journey is a long one, and we'll be traveling through dangerous territory that you have yet to experience. All four of you will accompany me, but I will only be taking Owltail and Toadface as warriors- we need Stormspirit and Nightbreeze here to defend the camp. The other clans have been quiet since the last gathering, but I don't want to take any chances of leaving the camp too unguarded." Stormspirit and Nightbreeze both bowed their heads, neither seeming upset about being left behind. Scarpaw guessed it was because they'd be together without their mentor duties for the day, and she couldn't help but twitch her whiskers in amusement.

"Understood, Snowstar. The camp will be kept safe while you're away," Stormspirit mewed. Snowstar nodded.

"Good. I have faith in you both, as well as the other warriors. Suntail will take momentary charge for the day, as per usual."

"When will we be leaving?" Maskpaw mewed, a sense of

urgency in his voice.

"We will leave the camp at dawn, so make sure to get some fresh-kill and plenty of rest. You cannot eat during the trip, so I'll have Webear prepare traveling herbs for all of you." Snowstar beckoned to the apprentices, as well as Toadface and Owltail, who both nodded. Scarpaw and Leopardpaw scrunched up their noses in disgust at the mention of the herbs. Snowstar flicked his ears to acknowledge their reactions.

"They're essential to the trip. You'll need plenty of energy and strength to reach the Stone-hollow before nightfall."

"I'll take my chances," Leopardpaw mumbled under her breath.

With a few final words, the group parted, apprentices relieved from their duties for the remainder of the day. Only Scarpaw remained by Snowstar's side now, and she looked up at him, a question still heavy on her mind.

"Snowstar, may I ask why Woodpaw won't be joining us to the Stone-hollow?" She had expected the leader to acknowledge this during their talk, and now she was left confused. His icy gaze was set on the camp entrance.

"Woodpaw is a smart young cat with excellent potential, but... His progression hasn't yet caught up with his determination." Scarpaw looked at her paws, suddenly embarrassed at asking such a question so freely. Could it be that the reason for Venomsight's previous behavior was Snowstar refusing his apprentice the opportunity to travel to the Stone-hollow with the others?

Scarpaw stood to bow her head towards the leader, who looked down at her with a softer gaze.

"I look forward to our venture tomorrow, Scarpaw. It's well deserved. Now go get some fresh-kill and rest; you'll need it for tomorrow, all of you." Scarpaw blinked gratefully up at the wise cat, then padded off to join the other apprentices outside the den. Excitement ran through the air like an electric current, and even Maskpaw kept his usual harsh remarks to himself. Tomorrow the

four of them would be traveling to the most sacred spot in the forest, closest to StarClan than even Sky-rocks; the pride was enough to cause her whiskers to quiver. Pressing her flank close to Sparkpaw's own, Scarpaw almost didn't notice the small form of Woodpaw watching from the shadows of the apprentice den.

Chapter 16

Scarpaw felt the fresh dew wet her underbelly as she crouched low to the lake's edge, watching Snowstar closely; it was still dark out. To reach the Stone-hollow, they had to travel along the Great Lake towards Sky-rocks, then pass through MistClan territory near the plains. The Great Lake separated RainClan and MistClan territory, and the easiest route towards the Stone-hollow was to pass along ThornClan's borders; the entire group kept eerily silent as they pushed closer and closer towards the enemy clan's territory.

After a few heartbeats, Snowstar flicked his tail, and continued onward to the left. The ground dropped down beside Scarpaw, leading to the lake's sandy edge, and she had to be careful not to lose her footing and fall into the dark water below. Leopardpaw came bounding up next to her, twitching her ears.

"The forest here is so dry and lifeless; no wonder ThornClan likes it here." Scarpaw let out a small mrrow of laughter.

"I thought the same thing when we passed through here on our way to the gathering. Only then, the clans were bound by the full moon's truce; If we came across a patrol now, who knows what could happen."

Sparkpaw padded up behind the two she-cats, his eyes shining in the darkness of dawn. "Are you kidding? A ThornClan patrol would lose their whiskers if they saw our group of cats along their borders, *especially* with Snowstar leading the front. They'd think they were under attack!"

Maskpaw grunted, his tail tip twitching. "Yeah, and they'd come back with a patrol of their own. If you ask me, we should've gone around the other way, near the ravine."

Leopardpaw scoffed, "We would never reach the Stone-hollow by nightfall that way! And besides, going around the ravine takes us directly into MapleClan territory. At least here, we can stalk along ThornClan's edge."

Maskpaw shot Scarpaw a look, his ears flat. "Yeah, well, at least one of us would feel at home." Scarpaw was about to shoot back a reply when Toadface batted the tortoiseshell apprentice with a heavy paw, his eyes narrowed. Maskpaw yowled in surprise, then stalked away, growling, towards the edge of the group. Scarpaw shot the older warrior a grateful glance. He simply nodded, then dropped back towards the end of the group.

"I've been meaning to ask you, Sparkpaw," Leopardpaw whispered, "how's training going with Toadface?" The blond tom blinked at her.

"Fine. Great, actually- he's an experienced warrior. None of the rumors you've probably heard about him are true."

Scarpaw lowered her voice, "What about his temper?"

"Only when I make stupid mistakes. But really, he's a kind-hearted cat under all the scars." Scarpaw looked back at where Toadface was now walking, his dull eyes barely visible in the darkness. For the first time Scarpaw saw something underneath his appearance; an experienced cat who's loyal to his clan. Feeling a wave of guilt, Scarpaw realized that this was not the cat who she should feel wary of; if any cat deserved to be questioned, it was Venomsight.

Scarpaw recognized the ground under-foot as they reached Sky-Rocks. They stood on the same slope as before, which dropped sharply into the wide hollow below. The moon pool shined silver in the growing light, and she could see a few remaining stars reflecting on its still surface. The hollow seemed so different without all the clans packed tightly together on the smooth rocks.

They bounded down the slope, across the sandy floor and began to climb back up the opposite side. Scarpaw could feel Leopardpaw's pelt prickling beside her, and she guessed her friend

was amazed by the look of the great gathering place she had yet to see, however she made sure to keep silent until they reached the top of the slope and began running through even more unfamiliar territory.

The grass here was thinner than the dense forest behind them, and the further they went, the more the trees began to thin out as well. Scarpaw recognized them as pines, stretching high and spread out, connected by bramble that acted as their passage. The mingled scents of Sky-Rocks started to fade, and another strange scent wafted into Scarpaw's senses; MistClan. While unfamiliar, she had recognized it from the two apprentices she had met at the gathering, Dovepaw and Bushpaw. Sparkpaw came padding up, glancing warily at the tall pines around them.

"I don't think I've ever been in MistClan territory before," he mumbled, "or anywhere close to it. Everything's so different out here."

Leopardpaw snorted, "I'd say. How could any cat feel comfortable so out in the open like this? I'd claw my ears off." Owltail chuckled, glancing at his apprentice.

"Well, get your claws ready, because It's about to get much worse." Scarpaw blinked, turning towards where the warrior was now looking, letting out a small gasp. Out of the bramble, Scarpaw could see a vast, wide open expanse of grass and hills, dotted with large fluffy creatures and the occasional bush-tree. Mist covered the plains like a thick pelt, reaching the thin woods where they were hiding and causing Scarpaw's thick fur to stick to her body.

Maskpaw shook his pelt violently next to her, complaining, "What is this? The mist here is so thick!" Snowstar gave him a look, silencing him, and Scarpaw twitched her whiskers.

"This mist has surrounded MistClan's territory for many, many moons. The Stone-hollow is farther down this path of trees; MistClan camp rests out in those plains. We're treading on their territory now," Snowstar mumbled. The entire patrol went silent, watching the leader with intent. All was silent until Toadface hissed from behind them, his matted pelt standing straight up.

"I can smell a MistClan patrol; they're coming this way!"

Chapter 17

The bramble surrounding the patrol shook viciously as the scent of MistClan cats grew stronger, causing Scarpaw's neck fur to prickle in fear. Four cats she didn't recognize burst out from their hiding spots, surrounding their group from each side. Maskpaw crouched low, hissing viciously at a burly looking apprentice in from of him, and the rest of their group seemed too surprised to follow. One MistClan cat stepped forward, flattening his ears and confronting Snowstar without fear. His pale curly pelt seemed almost untouched by the thick mist, and he eyed the older leader with a cold gaze. Scarpaw felt her heart rising up to her throat.

"Snowstar," the curly-haired tom growled, "what is this? A battle patrol?" The other MistClan cast hissed loudly, stalking slowly closer to the others. Scarpaw growled at a larger warrior in front of her, sizing him up in case a fight broke out. Snowstar looked back into the tom's eyes with the same hostility.

"Sheepfur. You and your warriors can rest easy; I'm bringing these apprentices to the Stone-hollow. We were just passing through." Sheepfur flicked an ear, watching the other RainClan cats curiously. His gaze rested on Scarpaw, and she held it, praying that her fear scent hadn't yet reached the cats around her. Sheepfur turned his head back to their leader.

"You've brought two warriors with you."

"You wouldn't take four apprentices across the forest without the help of stronger warriors, would you?"

Sheepfur grunted, "I suppose not. But Crowstar will want to hear about this; you'll be coming with me."

Owltail growled, and Maskpaw stepped forward, lashing his tail back and forth.

"We'll be doing no such thing! You dare question the words of our leader?" Snowstar swung around, anger flashing in his eyes.

"Hush, Maskpaw! You're in no place to spit orders at these cats. Keep your mouth shut, or I'll rethink allowing you into the Stone-hollow!"

Maskpaw shrunk back in shock, silent as a mouse, but Scarpaw could almost feel the fury radiating off of his tortoiseshell fur. It took every muscle in Scarpaw's body not to snicker at the fierce scolding.

Snowstar turned his head to look back at Sheepfur. "We will follow you, but we must hurry. These apprentices must see the hollow before nightfall." Sheepfur bowed his head, ignoring Maskpaw's previous outburst, then addressed his warriors with a flick of his tail. He turned to walk out into the open plains, and the group followed, flanked by the rest of the MistClan patrol. Scarpaw recognized Bushpaw, walking near Maskpaw, and locked eyes with him. There was hostility hidden there, but he gave her a curt nod, almost as if saying, *"congratulations"*.

The patrol passed close to a strange, unfamiliar creature, grazing on the dew-wet grass.

"What is that?", Leopardpaw whispered, lowering herself closer to the ground. A smaller calico warrior answered, "That's a sheep. They're mostly harmless, as long as you stay away from their clumsy feet. The real danger comes from the dog that controls them." Sparkpaw's fur prickled, eyeing the warrior with shock.

"*Dog*? You live out here with a dog?"

Sheepfur glanced back at him, amusement shining in his gaze.

"We live in these plains. The dog only appears from time to time, and he tends to stay away from our camp. He's learned many times to keep away, or else." Sparkpaw and Leopardpaw looked to eachother in confusion, and Scarpaw flicked her tail in agreement. Everything about these cats set her on edge.

The scent of MistClan grew even stronger, and the patrols speed began to increase. They were far out into the plains now, and they ran down a small hill, exposing the camp. It was hidden from the far away brambles; Scarpaw hadn't even seen it from where they previously stood, near the pines.

The camp itself seemed small, with scattered bush-trees surrounding the outer edge. They hid a small pool of water and stones, and thin dens scattered the open grass. Cats began to emerge, staring wide eye'd at the patrol, some bristling with hostility. Sheepfur whispered some words with a larger she-cat, who nodded and bounded off towards the pool with stones.

Toadface reached down towards Scarpaw to whisper, "Sheepfur is their deputy. He's a fair warrior, and Crowstar is a reasonable leader; we'll be fine." He then added, "Your fear scent is strong. Don't let them know you're afraid; stand with pride."

Scarpaw blinked, nodding, and took a few deep breaths as the she-cat returned, Crowstar following her. His eyes narrowed at the sight of Snowstar, and he stalked closer, standing tall and menacing. Snowstar bowed his head.

"Snowstar, what is this? Why did my warriors bring you here?" He glanced at the apprentices, then flicked an ear. "Are you on your way to the Stone-hollow?"

Snowstar nodded. "Yes. We would not have made the trip if we took the route around the ravine; this was our only option. I apologize."

Crowstar blinked, all hostility suddenly replaced with a noble respect. "There is no need. You have made this journey many times before, and you are welcome to again. I am pleased to see that RainClan will soon be accepting these fine apprentices as warriors." he sighed, looking towards Snowstar. "After the last gathering, I'm surprised you chose this route, through their territory."

"They prove no threat to us," Snowstar mewed, "and they know it." The two leaders stared at each other for a moment, a silent understanding passing through them. Scarpaw could see familiarity

there, like two old friends. Crowstar let his gaze rest over the apprentices again, showing a small grin.

"Your apprentices are strong, Snowstar. I wish you all the best of luck."

Scarpaw bowed her head towards the dark leader, pride making her fur warm. The others followed, but Maskpaw seemed apprehensive. The mysterious leader's praise was unexpected, and for once, she could understand how he felt. Everything about this territory seemed strange and unnatural to her.

"Well, I shouldn't keep you much longer, if you are to reach the Stone-hollow. I apologize for the confusion." Crowstar lifted his head, waving his tail at the nearby patrol of MistClan cats still standing nearby. "Sheepfur, Puddlepelt, Hailfleck, please escort these cats back to the pines."

With one last bow of his head, Crowstar turned away to walk back to his den in the stones. The she-cat from before came padding up, along with the calico tom Scarpaw had faced, Sheepfur with them. All hostility had faded from their expressions, and Sheepfur nodded towards the RainClan patrol, leading them back up the hill and out of camp without a word.

"Do we really need an escort?" Leopardpaw mumbled into her ear. Owltail overheard, whispering, "These plains are much larger than you'd expect, and the mist here causes confusion. Plus, you heard what he said about the dog; we should be thankful." Leopardpaw grumbled, still frustrated from having their travel delayed, as they padded back towards the grazing sheep. The thin line of pines ahead was barely visible in the thick wet haze.

When the line of bramble finally became clear, Sheepfur had exchanged some parting words with Snowstar in a hushed voice and then bounded off through the mist. Scarpaw was surprised to see that after a few paw-steps, they had disappeared, almost like silvery StarClan warriors disappearing from a dream.

"We must hurry now," Snowstar growled, "this visit has taken up a lot of time. Look; the sun is already sinking." Scarpaw followed

his gaze to see the sky already tinting orange; the mist had covered their view of the sky, and no one seemed to have realized how much time had been wasted already in MistClan territory.

They padded deeper into the pine forest, straying as far from the misty cloud as possible. Here the trees seemed denser, and Scarpaw felt lush ferns underneath her paws. The tall trees cast long, ominous shadows onto the forest floor, like giant cats stalking their every step.

The Stone-hollow couldn't be far away now.

Chapter 18

No cicadas sang in this part of the forest to signal dusk, the only sounds coming from the crunching of dry nettle underneath their paws and a distant owl, singing softly to itself among the pines. Scarpaw could feel herself growing weary from the lack of food, the effect of Webear's traveling herbs slowly beginning to fade. Imagining the long treck back home caused her tail to droop, dragging through the leaves behind her.

Leopardpaw touched her shoulders lightly with her tail-tip, silently sharing in her friends exhaustion. It was then that a sour, unnatural scent wafted into Scarpaw's nose, causing her to scrunch up her muzzle and hiss.

"Great StarClan, what is that smell?" Leopardpaw gaped, "I feel like I'm going to be sick!"

Snowstar stopped, crouching low and looking out through a thick wall of bramble ahead. The rest of the cats followed to look, and Scarpaw's fur stood on end at the sight of what must've been a Thunderpath. The smooth, unnatural stone stretched on for as far as she could see in both directions, curving away in the distance, large oak's blocking the rest of her view. The forest continued on the other side, seeming even darker and lusher than where they currently stood. No cat spoke for what felt like a moon until Snowstar took a step back, facing the other cats.

"The Stone-hollow lays not much farther, deep in those woods." The trees looked wild and untouched across the Thunderpath, and Scarpaw gulped, looking up towards her leader.
"Is that MistClan territory?", she whispered. Snowstar flicked his ears, keeping his eyes trained forward.
"No cat owns the territory beyond the Thunderpath," he mewed, "There, StarClan rules free."

Owltail and Toadface took the role of explaining to the apprentices how to safely cross the Thunderpath, going over the basics and what to listen for before bolting out onto the flat, smelly stone.

"Monsters can kill, but they don't tend to stray off of the path too often. You stay here in the grass until their sound dies away, and bolt across as quickly as you can."

Maskpaw stepped forward, "And what if a monster *does* stray from the path?"

"You pray StarClan lets you in," grumbled Toadface. Owltail did not respond.

Sparkpaw was the first to go, making sure the path was quiet before bolting across, his pelt sticking out from fear. The entire scene seemed to stretch out for moons in front of her, and she watched, her heart racing, as his paws touched the grass on the other side. He sat, panting, nodding towards Toadface, who nodded back. Scarpaw saw pride shining in his pale yellow slits.

It was Leopardpaw's turn to go next, but when she was too frozen with fear to make the run, Owltail pelted alongside her, nudging her back-side with his snout to encourage her forward. Leopardpaw pounced into the thick undergrowth with her sides heaving, snagging her pelt on some sharp bushes. Owltail licked in between her ears to calm her.

Scarpaw let out a purr of relief. Even with no monsters in sight, no cat knew when they could again appear, streaking across the Thunderpath with their blinding eyes and heavy black paws that threatened to snap a cat's bone like a twig.

Slowly placing a paw onto the strange surface, Scarpaw prickled with discomfort. It was hot and sticky, and panic quickly began to rise to her throat like bile. She could feel Snowstar's icy gaze

burning holes through the back of her head. A distant roar filled her ears, but it was still a far way off; if she went now, she could make it. Gathering all her courage, Scarpaw took off, running with all the power of LionClan coursing through her veins. The roaring was getting louder, and louder, distant glowing eyes starting to show beyond the oaks, as Scarpaw crashed into Sparkpaw on the other side. His familiar scent flooded her nose, masking the awful smell of the Thunderpath, making her feel giddy.

"You made it," he whispered, affection glowing in his blue eyes. Scarpaw nodded, too exasperated to speak, settling herself low to the ground to watch the other side of the Thunderpath where Toadface, Maskpaw, and Snowstar still stood. Maskpaw glanced at Toadface, who mumbled some words that Scarpaw could not hear. Returning his gaze back to the Thunderpath, Maskpaw's pelt bristled, determination filling his eyes. The monster from before was in sight now, approaching fast, and Scarpaw sent a silent prayer to StarClan that Maskpaw wouldn't burst onto the path right then and there. Terrible images of cat meeting monster flashed through her mind, and she shook them away with a shudder. She had to trust that he would go when it was safe.

The monster roared by, sending up waves of dirt and leaves, spraying all over the cats below. Maskpaw was sprinting towards them now, wild fear in his face, as he crashed hard into Leopardpaw, the two rolling painfully into the thick bramble behind them. Owltail chuckled, and Scarpaw let out a breath she didn't know that she was holding. She hated to admit it, but she was terrified for the tortoiseshell apprentice.

Toadface ran over next, then Snowstar, after making sure he was safely across, followed. He was panting hard, his white pelt matted and all puffed out like a cloud. He took a moment to catch his breath, looking over the patrol with relief, then nodded.

"Right, very good. Let us keep moving." He heaved himself up, casually stalking through the strange bramble ahead. Scarpaw followed first, anticipation beginning to rise in her chest.

The grass here was soft and cool against her paws, a deep lush green that covered the entire forest foor. The tree's fanned out high

and blocked their view of the sky above, but the wind seemed to whisper as she walked by, and Scarpaw strained her ears to hear what they were saying; she couldn't make anything out, and the whispers faded softly into the calming sounds of the forest.

StarClan lives in these woods, she thought, *could my father be here too?* If he had heard her, he gave no sign, and Scarpaw ventured on, her mind swimming with questions that she kept to herself. Something about the atmosphere here gave her the impression that she should stay silent.

As they continued through the forest, the ground began to get rockier, small pebbles getting stuck occasionally in Scarpaw's pads. The rocks grew in size the further they went, the ground starting to slope slightly upward. At some points, they had to leap from rock to rock, careful not to slip and fall towards the sharp stones below. Scarpaw looked to Sparkpaw, both remembering their training in the mud-hollow, smiling. They had no trouble leaping from stone to stone, gradually climbing the slope and leading their clan-mates. The canopy of leaves still covered the sky, their only indication of time being the heavy darkness that now surrounded them. At the top of the rocky rise, Snowstar stopped, moving to allow the rest of the patrol to stand on a large stone with him. Ahead of them now was a thick wall of soft grass and bush, sloping slightly downward now into a hidden hollow. The rise continued off to the left, rocks jutting out sharply around the encased bramble like ribs, protecting whatever was precious underneath. Most of the patrol was panting now, sitting to catch their breath. Snowstar did the same, pointing towards the strange bush ahead of them.

"There it is; The Stone-hollow," he hoarsely mewed, "hidden behind that wall of bramble. We cannot enter until the moon appears in the center of the sky; then, I will take you all inside, and I will share tongues with StarClan."

Leopardpaw looked a little uneasy, saying, "How will we know when the moon reaches the center of the sky from here? The trees block our view completely." Snowstar looked towards Scarpaw and Sparkpaw, twitching his ears.

"You two will climb the rest of the rise there to the left until the

trees thin out enough for you to see the sky. Return to us here, when we can then enter the hollow." The two apprentices nodded towards him, then bounded off to climb the rest of the slope with ease. She silently thanked Stormspirit for the training he put them through at the mud-hollow; all the mud in her pelt seemed worth it now as the two bounded upward like squirrels, towards the sky.

Chapter 19

The boulders grew larger as the two apprentices climbed, sometimes causing them to find an alternative route around. Scarpaw leapt onto the stone above her, looking ahead to see that the rocky slope smoothed out, returning again to soft grass and fern. The trees parted around them, exposing the vast night sky. A soft breeze ruffled her fur, causing waves in the grass at her paws. Sparkpaw climbed up beside her, following her gaze to see the moon, crawling slowly towards the center of the sky. He let out a deep breath, settling himself in the grass by her paws.

"You know, it's strange," he mewed after a period of silence, "When Pepperpelt took me around the forest on my first outing as an apprentice, she told me about all the clans and territory's; but I never imagined them quite like this."

Scarpaw tilted her head slightly, settling herself down next to him. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I had only ever seen the pines from a distance, at the lake's edge. And I haven't been to a gathering yet, so the most I knew about ThornClan territory was from the dry undergrowth at our border; and the stench that comes with it." Scarpaw laughed, gazing back up at the starry sky.

"I know what you mean. When I went to Sky-rocks for the gathering, everything seemed so strange. And here, too; even though we share a forest, all the clans feel a world away." Sparkpaw nodded, following her gaze to silently admire the stars.

His voice came as merely a whisper, "Snowstar said that StarClan rules in these woods. Do you think Pepperpelt is here?"

Scarpaw looked to him, trying to hide her pity. Memories from the she-cat's death and the events surrounding it flooded her heart with grief, causing her tail to twitch. Not only that, but she felt the

exact same way about her father. Of course she was a loyal RainClan cat, but the possibility that he was here now, watching over her from the starry ranks, filled her with emotion.

Then there was the fear that maybe, because of her choice to leave her birth clan behind, her father's spirit chose not to watch over her at all. Did her loyalty to the clan mean more to him than their blood? Scarpaw had never experienced a sign from StarClan; did Hawkheart have a stronger connection to their father than she did? The thought sent a wave of envy through the apprentice.

Blinking away her own thoughts, Scarpaw turned back to the tom and whispered, "Yes. And I bet she's very proud of you, Sparkpaw."

The tom shut his eyes for a moment, opening them again to smile at her. "Thank you, Scarpaw. I think you're right."

The two sat close together in silence, watching the sky, until the moon climbed to the center above. Scarpaw stood first, shaking the chill out of her pelt.

"We should go back down now, and quickly. The others have waited a long time." Nodding, Sparkpaw followed her back down the rocky slope, both carefully leaping downward onto the stones below. They reached the spot where they had left the patrol, and all the other cats stood at the sight of the two apprentices. Maskpaw mumbled something under his breath to Leopardpaw, who rolled her eyes, and Snowstar stepped forward.

"Well? Is it time?"

"Yes, Snowstar. The moon has risen to the center of the sky; we can enter," Scarpaw mewed, bowing her head. Snowstar nodded, thanking both cats, then turned towards the bramble wall hiding the Stone-hollow. Anticipation ran through the air, and Scarpaw padded over towards Leopardpaw, who smiled at her with a twinkle in her eye. No cat spoke as Snowstar turned around, facing the apprentices.

"You four will follow me inside, and no one will speak. This is a place for silence." He flicked his tail towards Owltail and Toadface

and added, "you two will stand guard outside. I will be sharing tongues with StarClan tonight." The two warriors bowed their heads, already walking towards the entrance and settling themselves on either side. Snowstar nodded, turning back towards the entrance. Slowly, he pushed his way through the greenery, waving his tail for the rest to follow. The apprentices looked at eachother, wide-eyed, then back at the bramble. Sparkpaw was the first to follow, and Toadface licked his head as he pushed inside. Maskpaw went next, then Leopardpaw. Scarpaw gulped, hesitating, before following her friend into the mysterious hollow. A small breeze flowed around her, tugging at her pelt and encouraging her forward.

The thick bramble went on longer than Scarpaw expected, and she could feel the sharp branches tugging at her fur and ears as she padded on. It was dark, and she had a hard time seeing Leopardpaw's familiar form in front of her. The grass under-paw was soft and pressed by many moons of paw steps, and Scarpaw stared in awe at how her own paws fit snug into an older imprint- other apprentices had made this journey in the past, the last step before obtaining their warrior name. She suddenly felt a strong surge of pride, the clan rivalries fading in her mind, mingling with the spirits of many cats, all here for the same reason; no matter their clan or their past, each cat had padded along this path, adding their prints to the grass below. After tonight, Scarpaw would be one of them.

Scarpaw almost let out a hiss as she bumped hard into Leopardpaw, who had stopped in front of her. Not daring to break the silence, she waited until her friend made her way into the hollow before slowly following; the bramble disappeared, widening out to surround the hollow with strong protection. A canopy of trees covered the sky with the exception of a small opening near the center, casting moonlight into the hollow, turning everything silver. Scarpaw shivered at the sight of her friends, who did the same- it looked as if her friends had appeared in the form of StarClan warriors, light glittering in their eyes and their pelts shining like they belonged in the noble ranks of StarClan. Praying what she saw wasn't some kind of prophecy, Scarpaw quickly shifted her attention back towards the hollow. Many sleek stones jutted out from the soft

mossy ground, sticking up towards the canopy of trees like the jaws of a cat, yowling towards the sky. A single stone sat larger than the others, directly beneath the hole in the trees, shining with moonlight and reflecting the light all around them. Snowstar made his way towards it, almost entranced. He settled himself down, touching his nose to the surface, and Scarpaw watched his thick pelt bristle as his head slowly dropped to his paws.

He must be speaking with StarClan, she thought with awe, *I wonder what it's like, meeting the ancient warriors? If it were me, would I have the courage to touch that stone?*

The apprentices sat on the edge of the hollow in silence. The moon had long since passed over the hole in the trees, and the hollow was no longer engulfed in moonlight. Scarpaw glanced over the other apprentices. Their fur was matted and unkept, heads lowered from fatigue, but there was a gleaming emotion in their eyes. It made Scarpaw's tail curl up just thinking about what could possibly happen when they returned to camp. These cats had trained with her, worked as hard as anyone to get this far. Despite her disputes with Maskpaw, she felt a strong surge of pride for all of them.

The emotion faded quickly however when she thought of Woodpaw. Snowstar had decided not to bring him with them, because he thought the younger tom wasn't yet ready. Scarpaw felt a mixture of pity and guilt; secretly, she had to agree with Snowstar. While Woodpaw tries as hard as any of them to please his vicious mentor, he never could quite catch up with the others. He was younger, and only started his training a few moons after Scarpaw; he had instantly clung close to Maskpaw's side, following his every step. The two seemed inseparable- but now, as Maskpaw sat silently staring at their leader, Scarpaw wondered if he missed the smaller tom at all. And what about Venomsight? The older warrior sent chills through Scarpaw's pelt. Poor Woodpaw got the short end of the stick, receiving him as a mentor. Venomsight trained him rigorously since that day, taking any anger out on the tom. It wasn't just his temper that made Scarpaw nervous, however; there was something off putting about the warrior, especially lately, and Woodpaw's incident with sneaking out of camp only added to

her suspicions. What could the dark warrior possibly be up to? Whatever it is, is Woodpaw stuck in the middle of it? Is *that* the true reason Snowstar didn't want Woodpaw to come, because he doesn't trust his mentor?

Scarpaw's thoughts were interrupted by Snowstar's sleeping form, now hissing and twitching restlessly. His claws were unsheathed, and with a shaky gasp, his icy eyes flashed open. He jumped to his paws, gasping, and locked eyes with Scarpaw from across the clearing. Something wasn't right, and the way Snowstar studied her face like he was trying to decipher a message sent chills through her spine.

"Come," he rasped, "we have to get back to camp. *Now*." Looking to eachother with worry, the apprentices got up, quickly following their anxious leader out of the hollow. It no longer felt safe and secure, and the frozen teeth-like stones seemed to scream *go, go, go*.

Chapter 20

Racing among the ferns, Scarpaw found comfort in the warmth of Sparkpaw's pelt brushing against hers. The uneasiness from Snowstar's sudden outburst hung heavy in the air, but no one dared to speak or ask any questions; he seemed to have a good reason for wanting to hurry back to camp, and the patrol followed his speed without question.

Climbing in and out of the Stone-hollow, the patrol found their way back to the lake's edge, racing along ThornClan's borders. Scarpaw stopped to see if there were any fresh scents that may signal an attack, but there was nothing; in fact, it almost seemed like no ThornClan cat had renewed their borders in a long time.

Once they got deeper into RainClan territory, a powerful fear-scent hung heavy in the air. Looking to Leopardpaw, Scarpaw saw panic in her eyes. Something was very wrong. Snowstar slowed his pace near the mud-hollow, and suddenly Nightbreeze's lithe frame burst through the undergrowth, her sides heaving with the struggle to breathe. At the sight of the patrol, her eyes widened, too surprised to even give them a proper greeting.

"Snowstar, you must return to camp; there's been a disaster."

Flattening his ears, he responded, "What kind of disaster?"

"I-It's Rosegaze," her voice broke as she continued, "she's dead."

Bursting through the mangrove tunnel, Scarpaw instantly noticed Woodpaw crouched in the center of the clearing with Sagefur, wailing; the older warrior at his side simply gazing unseeing at a distant spot between the trees. Rosegaze was their

mother. Dawnleaf and Berryface sat close together, grief-stricken, and the other wandering cats seemed wild with panic. At the sight of their leader, the whole clearing went silent, eyes watching him with quiet fear. Snowstar stepped forward, pelt prickling, to where Suntail was standing beside the Half-tree.

"Where is her body?" Snowstar whispered. Suntail looked uncomfortable, and Stormspirit came padding over with the same expression.

"I was out on patrol with Suntail and Woodpaw, when there was a scream. We followed the fear-scent past the black-tree, when we started to smell blood."

"A lot of blood," Suntail whispered. Stormspirit looked to his paws before speaking again.

"The trail ended at the river. There was blood everywhere, scattered all along the shore and the ferns. Her body wasn't there, but her fur was scattered everywhere."

"It was her," Woodpaw croaked, "that was her scream. I know it."

Suntail nodded, "Her scent was all over the place; It was Rosegaze for sure." Snowstar slowly lowered his head, overcome with shock. There were hidden thoughts swimming around in his eyes like minnows. Toadface walked up, his face lowered in pain, and Stormspirit touched his shoulder with his tail in silent support.

Was the beautiful she-cat Toadface's mate?

The tenderness of Stormspirit & Toadface's friendship hit Scarpaw like a wave, and it was hard to believe that she had ever had mistrust in the disfigured warrior.

Snowstar took a shaky breath, turning towards Webear, who had just padded up, looking exasperated. "Was she expecting?" his voice came as merely a whisper, and after a moment of silence, Webear bowed her head. Toadface stumbled away in horror, running out of camp, with Stormspirit worriedly calling after him.

The ground seemed to crumble under Scarpaw as her breath hitched, overcome with emotion. Snowstar shut his eyes against his own thoughts, shaking with grief, and mumbled, "Right now, we will hold the vigil that Rosegaze and her kits deserve."

As Snowstar climbed up the Half-tree to address the news, Scarpaw slowly wove her way through the growing crowd to try and find Woodpaw. He was shaken and hurt, and Scarpaw couldn't bear to see him like this; as much as the sudden and vicious death sent fear through the she-cat, she was worried about Woodpaw too much to let her panic take control. Spotting him towards the back of the crowd sitting close with Maskpaw and Sagefur, their muzzles almost touching, Scarpaw stopped. A strange emotion prickled at her, forming discomfort at the sight of them, siblings and friends, supporting eachother silently with a bond she would never know. Maskpaw turned his head to look at her, darkness clouding in his gaze, but he said nothing. Scarpaw looked to her paws, weaving her way back through the crowd with her tail drooping behind her. This was a moment for Woodpaw to be with his family and closest friends; Scarpaw would give them space.

Finding Sparkpaw and Leopardpaw near the edge of the crowd, she joined them just in time to hear Snowstar's yowl. He didn't address the clan with the usual words to announce a meeting, but everyone seemed to understand regardless. Even Coldclaw held his tongue, crawling out from the elders den alongside Fawneyes, neither making a sound. Slowcloud and Deadmouth followed shortly after, pelts touching, and sat near the back as usual.

"Rosegaze is dead," Snowstar boomed, "and will receive the deserved vigil, with or without her body. She was a skilled warrior and a gentle mother, providing the clan with brave and respected cats. All the clans will grieve for Rosegaze, and what she has done..." Snowstar's words faded as Scarpaw's eyes flicked to the edge of the crowd where the dark shape of a cat was making his way towards Woodpaw, speaking in a low voice. As Scarpaw focused, she recognized Venomsight, seeming to give words of comfort to his apprentice; but something in Woodpaw's eyes chilled Scarpaw, his fear wildly obvious. What about this dark warrior scared Woodpaw so much? What were they saying?

As the meeting broke up, Scarpaw decided that she had to learn more. The sudden death of Rosegaze caused panic throughout the clan, and her mistrust of Venomsight gave her the indication that whatever was happening, the dark warrior could be behind it.

She let her paws guide her, and looking up, she noticed the elders den, tucked gently behind the old log, with Slowcloud and Deadmouth just making their way inside. Slowcloud noticed her first, seeing the panic in her eyes, and immediately gave a flick of his tail, indicating her to follow. Gulping, Scarpaw bounded behind the large log, into the shady hollow.

Coldclaw grumbled something under his breath as she entered, with Fawneyes already asleep beside him. Slowcloud gestured for her to follow him towards the back of the den, settling himself onto a soft bed of moss. Deadmouth lay with his dark pelt touching Slowcloud's, his head resting tiredly on his paws. His horrifyingly twisted jaw was placed uncomfortably between them, and Scarpaw approached cautiously, feeling uncomfortable in the soft space, like she didn't belong.

"Whats wrong, Scarpaw?" Slowcloud spoke in a hushed voice, "It's alright, sit. You can tell me." Scarpaw blinked gratefully, slowly settling onto the soft moss. Taking a moment to gather her thoughts, Scarpaw looked up into the elders searching gaze.

"It's about Venomsight," she mumbled, "you said you knew a lot about him, last time we spoke. I was wondering, well- I was wondering what you could tell me about him." She paused, discomfort prickling at her fur. "About his past, maybe?" Even with Scarpaw's thoughts of distrust regarding the warrior, they were still simply thoughts, and she was afraid of how the rest of the clan would feel if they knew of Scarpaw's feelings regarding one of their most skilled warriors.

Slowcloud watched her in silence for a moment, then dipped his head to speak softly, "I can tell you about him, but we need to keep our voices down. Coldclaw is his father." Scarpaw's ears pricked in surprise as he continued, "I would tell you to ask him about his own son, but Coldclaw is viciously bitter. He's not an easy cat to please, especially with his sons, and he wouldn't give you very useful information."

Bitterness must run in the family, Scarpaw thought, picturing Venomsight and Coldclaw side by side. They did share many similarities now that she thought about it, both sharing their dark pelts and prickly attitudes. Glancing over at the slumbering form of Coldclaw, she wondered how she had never noticed the similarities before.

"My brother," Slowcloud gestured towards Coldclaw, "he's always been that way. Proud, but maybe a bit too much at times. Venomsight took after him well, but his other son; He's your mentor, isn't he? Yes, he's quite different, that one. I still remember when he was apprenticed, alongside his brother. Coldclaw was quite proud that day." Scarpaw blinked, taking the information in while Slowcloud went on about the past. Stormspirit was Venomsight's brother? And not only that, but Coldclaw was their father? Scarpaw pictured Stormspirit alongside the darker warrior, trying to spot the similarities. They shared the same striking yellow eyes, dark pelts; but besides appearances, did they share any other traits? Stormspirit had always been a determined mentor, patient and kind, being one of the first cats to welcome her as a true RainClan apprentice. Venomsight had never shown her any kindness or tenderness, and his actions towards his own apprentice only caused more worry. Woodpaw was definitely involved in some dark plans, and Venomsight had to be in the center of it all.

Scarpaw twitched her tail to interrupt Slowcloud's memories. "With all due respect, Slowcloud, I was thinking of some different information... Like his childhood, maybe. Something that could've caused his strange behavior." Slowcloud eyed her for a moment before replying.

"You think Venomsight could be behind all these terrible incidents, dont you?"

Gulping, Scarpaw nodded, shame prickling at her paws like water from the stream. Slowcloud sighed.

"Don't worry; I'm on your side, Scarpaw." He blinked, "While he is my brothers son, he's always had darkness in his heart. You're not the only cat to suspect him of darker actions."

Scarpaw let out a breath she wasn't aware that she was holding. "But why? What reasons could he possibly have to do such things?"

"Venomsight was mentored by his father," Slowcloud mumbled, "so he got the end of Coldclaw's temper. Whether it payed off in the end, StarClan knows, but it certainly caused an obsession to form in Venomsight."

Scarpaw narrowed her eyes. "Obsession for what?"

"For a son," Slowcloud shut his eyes, "a son to train, to grow into a powerful warrior just like him. I presume that he believes having a strong son would please his father somehow." Scarpaw nodded, trying to understand.

"But Venomsight doesn't have a mate; none of the queens in camp feel safe around him," she mumbled, remembering the incident in front of the nursery, with Dawnleaf's kits. Venomsight had seemed interested in her son then.

"Exactly," Slowcloud's ears flattened, "I think this caused anger, maybe even resentment. He wanted to have Rosegaze's kits; he was obsessed with her, when they both were young. And she was interested in his strength."

Scarpaw blinked, "But Rosegaze was Toadface's mate, wasn't she?"

Slowcloud nodded. "Yes, but Venomsight was her mate before him. They had one litter; three daughters," He paused before continuing, "they all died as newborns. Some sort of sickness, no cat's fault; but Venomsight saw this as a sign. He thought that StarClan was telling him Rosegaze should've had sons, not daughters."

Scarpaw shook her head in horror. "How? StarClan would never send a sign in the form of three kit's corpses like that."

"Venomsight didn't see it that way. Rosegaze was horrified, refusing to be his mate any longer; She chased him out of the nursery, claws and all."

Scarpaw could feel her breathing quicken. How could Venomsight's strange obsession with having a son be the cause of

any of this? The prophecy, ThornClan, Pepperpelt, Rosegaze...

"I could be wrong, and none of this could be connected," Slowcloud looked back up to whisper, "but the chances are likely. Keep your eyes open, Scarpaw. Whatever is happening here, it's happening right under our noses."

It was then that Deadmouth lifted his head, facing Scarpaw with a fierceness in his eyes. The older warrior tried opening his disfigured mouth, a strangled sound coming out as merely a whisper, until Scarpaw could almost make out what the elder was trying to say:

The apprentice, he whispered in a scratchy voice, *watch the apprentice.*

Chapter 21

"Leopardpaw, listen," Scarpaw hissed, "he told me himself. It's all true." Leopardpaw twitched an ear, shuffling her paws in discomfort.

"I believe you, Scarpaw, it's just... how do we know that any of this is connected? I mean, sure, theres some strange things going on, and Venomsight has a temper. But do you *really* suspect him of, I don't know... treason?"

Scarpaw shook her head. "I don't know. But I have a really, really bad feeling. Don't you remember the incident with Woodpaw? Didn't that seem a little strange to you?"

"Yeah, really strange. It's just... a lot to swallow."

The two apprentices sat behind the apprentice den in the bushes, alone in the darkness of the night, the only sounds coming from the distant frogs and the soft wind. Scarpaw *had* to share what she had learned, and this seemed to be the only way. It was late, and the moon hung high above them, illuminating the eyes of the two she-cats as they spoke in hushed voices, afraid of waking the other apprentices.

"Maybe Venomsight isn't behind everything, but... He and Rosegaze used to be mates. They even lost her first litter; she chased him out of the nursery."

"Yeah, so?"

"*So,* if he and Rosegaze fought over her kits, he could've been the one to kill her. She was pregnant when she died; maybe Venomsight didn't like the idea of her having another cat's litter."

"He wanted a son," Leopardpaw mumbled, "If she had a son with another cat, Venomsight would be furious."

"Exactly!" Scarpaw stood, pacing around the marshy grass. Her mind was swimming with thoughts concerning the darker warrior. "That could be why he's so tough on Woodpaw, too. Maybe he sees him like a son; he wants him to be strong like him, but Woodpaw can't live up to his expectations. He's not like Venomsight."

Leopardpaw gazed at her friend with concern. "So, what are we supposed to do? Should we tell Snowstar?"

"No, no way."

"What? Don't you think this is something he should know about?"

"If Snowstar knew, it would only cause more problems. He'd confront Venomsight before we even know for sure if he's behind any of it, and then we wouldn't be able to keep investigating. He'd be onto us."

Leopardpaw sighed, flattening her ears. "Scarpaw, I don't know... What if we're getting ourselves involved in something we shouldn't?"

Scarpaw blinked, anxiety forming in her belly. "That's an even better reason *to* get involved! If it affects the clan, it affects us, too."

Looking to Scarpaw for a few moments, Leopardpaw finally shook her head, looking up towards the night sky. "You know I'll be there to help you, no matter what."

Scarpaw flicked her tail. "So you will help me, then?"

"Do I have much of a choice?" Leopardpaw chuckled, padding her friend in the side with her front paw playfully. "If it means that much to you, then of course I'll help."

"Thanks, Leopardpaw," Scarpaw breathed, licking the top of her friends head in affection. "Listen, maybe we should just get some rest now, and try and find out more in the morning. Let's both try to

keep an eye out for any strange behavior from Woodpaw, though; what Deadmouth said about 'watching the apprentice' still concerns me."

"What, you mean behavior even more strange than usual?" When Scarpaw twitched her tail in annoyance, Leopardpaw laughed, shaking her pelt. "Yeah, yeah, okay. Behavior *even more strange* than usual. Got it."

Scarpaw could hear the soft patter of rain from somewhere nearby, slow and comforting. Opening her eyes, however, Scarpaw was confronted not by her clan clearing or her den, but an abandoned two-leg fence, covered with moss and crumbling to the grass below. Beyond the fence stretched an expanse of grass and wildflowers, and behind her was the edge of the forest, thick and welcoming. Scarpaw blinked, spinning around, trying to figure out where she was and how she got there; the wind that blew around her almost seemed to whisper, but Scarpaw couldn't understand what it was trying to say.

Looking up, she noticed the stars, glowing brighter than ever before, and she watched in awe as one of them grew, falling towards the ground until it took the form of a cat with broad, strong shoulders, dappled in starlight, his eyes shining like two full moons. The older tom stood for a moment, taking in the sight of the terrified apprentice below him, before stalking forward, filling the air with the scent of fresh morning dew and thick, healthy growth in new-leaf.

Scarpaw gasped, scrambling back into the forest behind her, unable to speak. There was something gentle about the tom before her, even quite familiar. He lifted his head to smile, causing Scarpaw's pelt to prickle and grow warm.

"I am always here," he spoke with a voice as smooth as stone, *"look up, and you will find me."*
Scarpaw blinked, stepping forward to speak, but a crash of lightning behind the starry warrior interrupted her, and the soft rain began to fall harder and harder, pelting her like hail. The figure of the soft cat was now gone, and she was left in the unfamiliar woods alone, bolting when lightning struck the ground once again. Sprinting

wildly through the dark, unfamiliar woods, Scarpaw yowled as she ran head first into a rose bush, the thorns digging deep into her fur. She could feel the blood pouring out from her sides as the voice from before boomed along with the lightning, yowling,

"Blood or clan."

Blinking open her eyes, Scarpaw gasped to see the bramble wall of the apprentice den, still neatly in tact, and Leopardpaw giving her a strange glance beside her.

"Great StarClan, Scarpaw, what's gotten into you? You rammed yourself so hard into the wall I thought the whole den was going to fall ontop of me!" Scarpaw narrowed her eyes, swinging around, taking in her surroundings. A calm breeze swept through the bramble den, and the other apprentices were just beginning to rise, yawning lazily and grooming themselves. Even jumpy Woodpaw was peacefully snoozing; Scarpaw was the only cat fully awake, breathing heavily, her pelt standing on end with fear.

"What's going on? You look like you've seen a fox," Leopardpaw questioned, tilting her head. "You haven't seen a fox, have you?" Scarpaw locked eyes with her friend, as the memory of her previous nightmare still hung heavy in her mind.

"Leopardpaw, can we talk? In private, please?" The spotted she-cat narrowed her eyes at Scarpaw, quietly nodding, then made her way out of the den to the camp clearing. A few cats were beginning to rise, enjoying the warm morning sunshine, no hint of any rain or storm. Scarpaw briskly made her way behind the apprentice den towards their usual hiding place, settling herself inside the small pocket of bramble. Leopardpaw did the same, watching her friend with concern.

"Whats all this about? Venomsight again?" Scarpaw hesitated before answering, flattening her ears.

"I received the prophecy; in a dream, last night." Leopardpaw blinked. "What do you mean?"

"The prophecy about *'blood or clan'*; a strange cat spoke it to me.

He was dappled in starlight, and..."

"And?"

"I feel as if I had seen him before, but I can't remember. He met me outside of the forest, near an old two-leg fence. I had never seen it before."

Leopardpaw's neck fur rose slightly as she listened to her friend. "StarClan... It must be. You said he gave the prophecy, did he say anything else?"

"Yes, but it's hazy... Before the prophecy, it was raining softly, and he told me to *'look up, and you will find me.'* Then lightning struck, and I bolted. I didn't know where I was, the forest was so unfamiliar... I ran straight into a rose bush, and thats when I heard the prophecy." Scarpaw shifted her paws, feeling uncomfortable hearing the words come from her own mouth. Why had she received the strange prophecy? How could she possibly be involved, and could this have anything to do with Venomsight's malicious plans?

"Scarpaw, listen... I really think we should tell Snowstar about this."

"Tell Snowstar about what?"

The two she-cats jumped at the sound of the new voice, turning to see Sparkpaw's face poking through the thick bramble to blink at the other two apprentices. "Uh... Have I caught you two at a bad time?"

"Yes, a *very* bad time," Leopardpaw grumbled, but Scarpaw sighed, locking eyes with the tom.

"What do you want, Sparkpaw?"

"Stormspirit and Owltail are looking for both of you; you're training together today," he mewed with a questioning look, "they asked me to fetch you."

"Thanks, Sparkpaw, tell them we'll be there in a rabbit's leap."

Scarpaw smiled at him, and he twitched his whiskers, gazing at her for a moment before turning tail and leaving the two she-cats alone. Scarpaw turned back towards her friend, looking at her with a more serious expression.

"We need to talk about this more, but we can't do it here. What do we do?"

"We're training together today, I'm sure we can get away from Owltail and Stormspirit somehow. Just follow my lead." Leopardpaw padded out of the small bush, leaving Scarpaw alone with her worry; something told her that this would not be as easy as Leopardpaw had made it seem.

Chapter 22

"Come on, Scarpaw, leap!" With a grunt, Scarpaw flew forward, crashing her smaller body into Leopardpaw with precision; paws outstretched, sliding to the side, she brought her friend to the mossy ground.

Leopardpaw yowled, scrambling to get up, shaking wet soil from her pelt as she grumbled, "Mouse-dung! I can't land a hit when you're always jumping around like a rabbit!"

Owltail flicked an ear in annoyance, sighing, "Your enemy won't leap under your paws for you to catch them in the heat of battle. Again!"

Stormspirit sat on the other side of the cats as the two apprentices practiced their fighting skills near the mud-hollow. Scarpaw's training had certainly been paying off, for she felt a new surge of accuracy and swiftness with every swipe of her paw. Leopardpaw was improving greatly too, she noticed, with visible muscles and powerful pounces. With a surge of pride, Scarpaw couldn't help but wonder if their training would soon come to an end.

Leopardpaw didn't seem as enthusiastic, rolling on her back in the mud.
"This is impossible without fresh-kill in my stomach. I'm *dying* out here." Owltail shook his head, casting an apologetic glance towards Stormspirit, who smirked.

"Leopardpaw, you should've eaten this morning; it's not like you to miss out on a meal." Leopardpaw grunted, and Owltail sighed, shutting his eyes.

"I suppose we've been training for quite a while; go and *hunt* for your lunch, and bring it back here." Stormspirit waved his tail, the usual gleam shining in his eyes.

"You go along too, Scarpaw; bring me back something as well. I'm starving." Owltail twitched an ear with annoyance, and the two apprentices dipped their heads, bounding off into the undergrowth. It wasn't until they reached the far end of the hollow, past the encasing brambles, when Leopardpaw stopped, looking Scarpaw in the eyes.

"Alright, we have some time to talk before anyone will get suspicious. What are you planning on doing about this prophecy?" Scarpaw gulped, anxiety gnawing at her stomach.

"I don't know. This seems like something that Snowstar should know about, right?"

"Yeah, but we don't want him knowing about Venomsight, remember? If the two are somehow connected, we'd have to spill the truth."

"Right," Scarpaw's tail drooped in disappointment, "that's true; we can't tell him." She wanted nothing more than her leader's help in reading the prophecy, but she couldn't risk the possibility of revealing her secret suspicions towards Venomsight. "Oh, StarClan, send me strength..."

Leopardpaw flattened her ears, looking thoughtful. "Well, we know for sure that you're connected to the prophecy somehow... but yours seems different than the one Snowstar had described to the clan. He was given the same message, but he spoke of monsters, blood and death..."

"Right, I didn't see any of that; just a storm, and the rose bush."

"So either you both were given two halves of one prophecy, or... he's lying about what he saw."

Scarpaw felt her pelt bristle against the breeze. How could she have the second half to the prophecy, when all she saw was a

strange cat and a storm? Snowstar's dream sounded different, violent; a scene playing out before his eyes. Scarpaw had experienced hers in first person, it all seemed so real... They didn't seem connected at all. Could Snowstar have really lied about what he had seen?

"The only way to know is if I tell him," Scarpaw sighed, "and I can't do that; not yet."

"Then what do you propose we do?"

Scarpaw blinked at her friend, panic clear in her green eyes. "For now, we need to focus on Venomsight. If he is up to anything, we need solid proof before we expose it to the clan. We should try and learn more about him, too; there's too much that we don't know."

"Right," Leopardpaw mumbled, "It's just going to be difficult; he's always either training with Woodpaw, or off doing things alone."

There was a rustle in the undergrowth behind the two she-cats, and they bolted straight up, fur on end as the questioning mew of Stormspirit called from somewhere in the woods,

"Scarpaw, Leopardpaw? What are you two doing lounging around? Go and spread out; you'll find prey much quicker that way. And hurry, too; I'm getting hungrier than a badger!"

"Yes, Stormspirit!" Scarpaw called, casting one last panicked glance towards her friend before bounding off, towards the direction of the Great-lake.

Scarpaw sighed, crouched hidden behind a patch of reeds and bramble near the water's edge. A water vole was approaching the edge nervously, and Scarpaw waited, claws unsheathed, ready to pounce when the moment was right. She kept herself completely still, ears pricked towards the water, and as soon as the prey lowered it's head, she bolted, grabbing it by it's neck and twisting until the body fell still. The satisfying taste filled her senses, and she brought it away from the lake, burying dirt over it for later.

Looking across the shimmering water, she spotted the point on the other side where she had last seen the mysterious set of eyes on her way to the gathering. Now the distant bushes were still, and the brilliant maple trees seemed dull. She could smell rain on its way. A single drop hit her nose, causing her to sneeze, as she turned away back into the familiar marshy woods. She couldn't stop worrying over the prophecy, and what was going to happen; everything Slowcloud had told her about Venomsight's past seemed to point towards the possibility of him being behind Rosegaze's death. She thought of Toadface, pity causing her tail to droop behind her. He lost not only his mate, but his litter; how was he doing? Scarpaw hadn't seen him in camp very often since. Was Sparkpaw's training being affected as a result? Whoever was behind this, Venomsight or not, Scarpaw vowed to bring them to justice.

Looking up, she blinked in surprise, finding that her paws had taken her to the sandy training hollow near the river. It was eerily empty, she noticed, as this was near where the patrol had found Rosegaze's body; fear pricked at her like a sharp thorn. She shouldn't be here, all alone.

Her ears flicked at a new thought, however; this was her chance to investigate! Glancing around, she noticed the bramble path leading behind the clearing towards the river's edge. She gulped, padding carefully inside, having to avoid sharp patches of twigs. Even before she reached the end, she could pick up the stale scents of Rosegaze, along with blood. She stepped out of the brambles, facing the river, and noticed almost immediately the edge. Blood was still visible there, along with patches of fur, scattered across the grass and reeds. Her breath hitched, both from fear and horror, as she forced herself forward.

Rosegaze's gentle scent was almost completely overcome with that of crow-food, causing vile to form in Scarpaw's throat. The patrol was right; there were clumps of fur near the edge, some stuck in the reeds and pebbles. There seemed to definitely be a sign of struggle, but where was her body? Snowstar had sent patrols to search the territory, and each time they came back with nothing; no clue's, either. This was all they had, and it gave nothing away.

StarClan, send some sort of help, she thought, neck fur prickling.

Then, she froze, ears suddenly pricked. There was another scent here, something she had never smelled before; it was faint, and she couldn't quite get a grasp on it, slowly stepping closer to the water's edge. It slipped from her senses, and she hissed, frustration biting away at her spirit. Why was it all so confusing?

Fear began to prickle its way back into her senses as she realized how dangerous this was; she was all alone, where Rosegaze had mysteriously been killed. She had to get out of here, before something happened to her!

Backing away from the river's edge, she tried catching her breath, taking one last glance at the blood before bolting back into the familiar bramble. Scarpaw didn't stop running, pelting faster and faster, trying to make her way towards the lake and her kill; something appeared quickly ahead of her however, and she crashed into a bundle of silvery spotted fur, rolling harshly into the trunk of a nearby tree with an alarmed yowl. Leopardpaw spit out a mouthful of leaves, ears flat.

"Scarpaw, what in the name of StarClan do you think you're doing, pelting towards me like that!"

"I didn't see you," Scarpaw mewed in between breaths, "I went to the river, to see where Rosegaze had died."

"Alone? Scarpaw, what's gotten into you? We still don't know what happened to her! You could've been killed!"

Scarpaw looked to her paws, her pelt on edge. "I know; I'm sorry."

"Did you find anything, at least?" Leopardpaw reached around to smooth her now ruffled fur, removing a sharp twig from her back.

"No, it was just as the patrols described," she mumbled, "but... there was a weird scent, one I had never smelled before. I couldn't tell what it was, it was too faint."

Leopardpaw stopped her grooming, looking back to Scarpaw

with concern. "It wasn't Venomsight?"

"No, this was different; I don't even know if it was cat."

Leopardpaw shook her head, twitching her spotted tail against the green ground. "Well, it could be nothing. I'm sure the patrol had scented it as well; they didn't seem to find it important enough to report."

"Yeah," Scarpaw agreed, but doubt still ebbed at her mind. If it wasn't Venomsight, what could it have been?

"I ran into Woodpaw and Venomsight while hunting," Leopardpaw mewed, "they were practicing battle moves closer to the ThornClan border."

"Did they see you?" Scarpaw's ear twitched.

"No. I hid in the brambles; I was following a bird, and it flew above my head too quickly. I could hear them ahead, and followed to see what was going on. It seemed normal, up until..."

"Until what?"

"Well, Woodpaw seemed extremely tired. Venomsight was trying to teach him this move to flip your enemy off of your back, but he just couldn't get it right. Venomsight grew agitated," she narrowed her eyes, "and stopped the lesson. He started saying things like, 'you're going to have to know this for when they come to asses you,' and talking about this 'they'... Woodpaw just nodded, looking uncomfortable."

Scarpaw's belly twisted. "What? It's Venomsight's job to asses his apprentice. Could he have meant Snowstar?"

"No, I don't think so... the way he spoke about 'they', it felt a lot different; like outsiders. Cats from somewhere else."

Scarpaw scraped at the earth with her claws, twitching her tail. "He's definitely up to something."

More droplets of rain hit the two she-cat's pelts, and before they

knew it, the rain was falling hard onto the forest. Leopardpaw gasped, "My prey! I've got to go collect it before the rain washes it away!"

"Me too," Scarpaw mewed, thinking of her water-vole. "Come on, lets meet back at camp. Stormspirit and Owltail won't be happy."

With a nod, Leopardpaw pounced away, leaving Scarpaw alone. She took one last glance behind her, towards the river, before bounding off to find her catch.

Chapter 23

Cool, light rain slid down Scarpaw's glossy pelt as she padded wistfully through the woods. She was somewhere new, not the familiar marshy forest she was used to; here, the grass was lush green, and large maple leaves crunched under-paw as she trekked on. Raising her head to the sky, she noticed the grey clouds parting to reveal the brilliant star from before, casting silvery light down upon her; the voice of the strange cat who had visited her seemed to ring off of the rain, mewing,

"Look up, and you will find me."

A large raindrop splashed into her eyes, and Scarpaw jumped back, alarmed, as the rain began to pelt even harder. The soil at her feet churned to mud, and she could feel herself slipping, far, far into the ground. She gasped out, yowling for help, but the pelting rain only filled her lungs with water, preventing her from making any sound. She shut her eyes, her head ready to collapse, as the mud swallowed her whole.

Blinking water out of her eyes, Scarpaw found her muzzle pressed up against Leopardpaw's back, who's snoring almost matched the booming thunder from her dream. Rain dripped onto her head from the bramble shading above, and she made a mental note to cover it with more growth as soon as possible.

The other apprentices were asleep, and the camp outside was

dark to signal it was still night. Woodpaw rested not far from Scarpaw, curled against Maskpaw, and she sighed with relief that he was here in the den; no cat should be out in this storm.

"Couldn't sleep?" The soft mew of Sparkpaw whispered from across the den, and Scarpaw blinked at his bright gaze.

"Not really; bad dream."

"Me too," he stretched his neck around to smooth a wet spot on his back, "and this storm sure doesn't help, either."

Leopardpaw's hind leg kicked out as she dreamed, and Scarpaw huffed with annoyance, avoiding her friend's kicks. Sparkpaw's whiskers twitched in amusement.

"You can come rest over here, if you'd like; my nest is big enough for two cats." Blinking, Scarpaw glanced at Leopardpaw's snoring form before warmly looking back towards the blond tom.

"Only if that side of the den has less leaks than over here."

"Not really," Sparkpaw mewed, "but there's less painful company."

Scarpaw smiled, padding carefully around Leopardpaw to settle close against Sparkpaw's pale pelt. He was warm, and his comforting pelt held her steady on one side, and she was pressed close to the bramble wall on the other. She rested her head on her paws, weariness hitting her like a sudden black wave. She could feel Sparkpaw's gaze on her as she drifted off once again, into a dreamless sleep.

"Wonderful," Leopardpaw mumbled, casting a dark frown out into the camp. The storm was still pouring harsh rain onto the forest, and not many cats were eager to rush out to their duties. Patchnose and Sagefur were sharing a miserable mouse under an overhanging branch closest to the warriors den, Suntail had emerged from the den as well, saw the rain, and went right back inside; the apprentices were all told that today's training was going to be put on hold, and now they all sat miserably inside their den,

watching the muddy camp like young toads, anxious to hop around and begin their training.

"At least we have time to rest," Woodpaw mewed light-heartedly, "Venomsight's battle training has been rigorous."

"His training is *always* rigorous," Maskpaw growled, "and you're always complaining. I can't stand sitting in here all day; my fur's going to crawl right off."

"You're welcome to go run around in this storm," Scarpaw mumbled, "some lightning would do you good." Maskpaw cast her a venomous glance, but said nothing.

"We could always find something around camp to do?" Sparkpaw tried to ease the tension.
Leopardpaw twitched an ear.

"In *this* weather? No, thank you. If you all want to clean mud out of your pelts for the next moon, then by all means, have at it. I'm going back to my nest." Scarpaw let her friend pass, inching closer to the den entrance, where Sparkpaw was gazing out.

"What did you have in mind?" Anything seemed better than lying around in the musky den all day.

"We could always see if Webear needs anything," Sparkpaw mewed, flicking an ear towards the rocky den closest to the Half-tree. "She's usually quite busy, not having an apprentice and all."

Scarpaw thought of the scrawny medicine-cat, always working effortlessly to make sure the clan was healthy and cared for. She had only spoken to Webear a pawful of times, but from those few encounters, she didn't seem to be a dislikable cat by any standards. "Yeah, sure. I don't mind."

"Great," Sparkpaw stood, shaking some droplets from his crooked whiskers, "let's go."

The entrance to Webear's den reminded Scarpaw of Snowstar's den in a way, surrounded by ancient, mossy stones and overgrown reeds. Pushing past, the two apprentices were greeted to

a large stone cave, going far back into an earthy resting space with ragged stones for holding herbs, a small pool of fresh water, and thick growth to protect from any sort of invasion.

Scarpaw approached the entrance to the cave, calling, "Webear, are you there?" She could hear a quick welcome mew from deep inside, and quickly rushed in, escaping the cold rain.

Webear was busy making poultices near the end of the earthy cave, too wrapped up in her duties to turn and properly greet the apprentices.

"Yes, hi. You can drop them right by the rock, there."

Scarpaw and Sparkpaw exchanged a confused glance, and Sparkpaw stepped forward, twitching his whiskers. "Er, we weren't brought here by anyone or with anything... We actually came to see if you needed any help."

Webear blinked, stopping to look over at the two apprentices, surprise shining in her eyes. "Oh, my bad; I thought it was Woodpaw again, bringing more herbs. Venomsight sure has been keeping him busy." Scarpaw narrowed her eyes, curiosity pricking at her paws, but she stayed quiet as Sparkpaw continued to speak.

"Not this time."

"What was it that you needed, again?"
Sparkpaw blinked, "Our training for today has been delayed by the storm, and we were curious if you needed anything from us before we spend the rest of our day hiding from the rain."

"Oh, I see; that's kind of you both. I would appreciate it if you took this goldenrod poultice to the elders den for me. Coldclaw and Fawneyes have stiff and aching joints."

"Ah, of course." Sparkpaw's tone seemed almost a bit disappointed, but Scarpaw lit up at the chance to go and visit the elders again; she missed Slowcloud's company. Webear's single white ear twitched restlessly as she gathered the herb, dropping the poultice's at the two apprentice's paws. Scarpaw gathered hers quickly, turning towards Sparkpaw with an expression that gave

nothing away.

"You go on ahead, I'll be there in just a moment." He simply blinked, thoughts swimming in his brilliant blue-green eyes, but said nothing as he padded slowly out of earshot. She took a breath, looking back towards Webear, who had returned to her herbs.

"What was that you had said about Woodpaw?"

"Huh?" Webear seemed surprised that Scarpaw was still there. "What do you mean?"

"You had mentioned him coming here often."

"Ah, yes. He brings me herbs quite often, always says it was an order from Venomsight; the poor lump always seems so miserable." Her white ear continued to twitch restlessly as she spoke, "I always appreciate more supplies, but it's strange. I've told Venomsight multiple times that if he's trying to give his apprentice to me, he's out of luck. I can manage my own here." She scoffed, almost to herself, shaking her head as she continued packing poultices into wads. Scarpaw rolled the new information over in her head; why would Venomsight put Woodpaw up to such a useless task?

To give himself a chance to slip away.

Neck fur rising, Scarpaw gathered the wad of herbs, padding swiftly out of the den. This storm was the perfect opportunity to find out more information; but first, she had to take care of the elder's joints.

Oh, why did I agree to do this?

"Watch it!"

Scarpaw could hear Coldclaw's angry hiss from the entrance to the elders den, pushing through with a sigh. Sparkpaw was busy rubbing the poultice through Coldclaw's pelt, who was busy complaining as usual. Fawneyes watched close-by with an amused smile, while Slowcloud and Deadmouth were snoozing huddled together near the back of the den. Scarpaw felt a twinge of sadness at not being able to speak to her favorite elder as she mewed a

greeting, padding carefully towards Fawneyes, who greeted her with a nod.

"Thank you both for bringing the poultices, I'm sure Webear appreciates it."

"What's to appreciate when this mouse-brain keeps pinching your pelt?" Coldclaw hissed, flinching away from Sparkpaw, who was barely touching the grumpy tom. Fawneyes batted Coldclaw over the ears, twitching her whiskers.

"That mouse-brain is my *son,* Coldclaw."

"Stormspirit and Venomsight are *my* sons, but were they excused from making stupid mistakes because of it? Surely not!" Sparkpaw cast Scarpaw a glance of pure regret, and she twitched her whiskers, thinking, *don't forget that this was your idea.* The blink he gave her in return seemed to say, *don't remind me.*

Stormspirit, Venomsight and Toadface crouched at the entrance to the apprentice den, their expressions grim and pelts soaked as thunder roared off in the distance. The storm didn't seem to want to let up, yet it was nearly sunset.

"Sorry, you five," Stormspirit sighed, "we'll see how tomorrow looks. The territory could be pretty flooded after all this rain, and we may have to take training closer to the ThornClan border."

Woodpaw blinked, twitching an ear as he mewed, "Oh, that's fine; Venomsight and I have been training there lately anyway." Scarpaw thought she could see a flicker of panic in Venomsight's eyes, but it vanished as quickly as it had appeared. *Had I imagined it?*

"Yes, well," Toadface mumbled, "hunting will be poor, so we'll want to focus on battle training. Get some rest; you'll need it." He nodded to Sparkpaw, who returned the gesture, and the warriors took the chance to slip out of the rain into the safety of their den. Scarpaw could see Suntail organizing a patrol in the clearing consisting of Nightbreeze, Sagefur, and Owltail, who all looked miserable. No cat wanted to do anything in this weather.

"It's almost like StarClan is weeping," Scarpaw mumbled. Were they trying to warn of another disaster soon to come?

"That's the most mouse-brained thing I've ever heard." Maskpaw's cynical mew rang throughout the murky den, and Scarpaw spun to face him, eyes narrowed.

"What did you say?"

"I said, that's mouse-brained!" He hissed, flattening his ears against his sleek tortoiseshell fur. "Have you run around in that storm for so long that water has clogged your thick skull?"

Flexing her claws, Scarpaw hissed back, standing in a sign of challenge. Maskpaw followed, only to be interrupted by Leopardpaw, who had just risen from a nap, her pelt sticking up in various different directions. "Can you all PLEASE keep your mouths shut long enough for me to get *some* decent rest?"

Tension crackled in the air like the lightning just outside as Scarpaw stared defiantly into Maskpaw's own deadly gaze, as he snorted, stalking across the den to whisper to Woodpaw. The smaller tom only looked uncomfortable, keeping his gaze towards his paws. The pelting rain hid their voices from her ears, but Scarpaw was certain he was making comments about her upbringing in MapleClan.

What nerve! That battle training couldn't come sooner; just wait till Maskpaw has to face me!
She stalked back towards the den's entrance, watching Stormspirit pad close to his brother's side. Venomsight's expression was unreadable, but Scarpaw could tell that Stormspirit was attempting friendly conversation. Her ear twitched, watching the two, noticing for the first time all of their similarities; even with Venomsight's tabby markings, they shared the same grey pelts, and their long limbs matched eachother stride for stride. Even their eyes seemed similar, and Scarpaw sighed, wishing she could hear their conversation.

Venomsight huffed some words of annoyance, stalking out of camp as Stormspirit watched from the clearing. His tail drooped

and his eyes glittered with uncertainty. *Did Stormspirit have suspicions of Venomsight's intentions as well?*

Chapter 24

Scarpaw pushed her way back inside the shady den, Leopardpaw just waking from a nap. The storm never ceased it's relentless raging, and the apprentices huddled close together as night fell on the marsh. The familiar sound of cicadas and birds were far away, drowned out by the encasing sounds of nature's fury; the dens were beginning to fall apart, and it took every able cat in the camp to keep them together. Scarpaw sighed, pelt soaked, as the rain found even more holes to pour down inside the den.

Twitching her ears at the sound of rustling, Scarpaw turned to see Woodpaw making his way past the sleeping forms of the other apprentices, approaching her at the den's entrance. He cast a weak smile, waving his tail.

"I'm going to try to find some more covering for the den; at this rate, it's going to fall apart." Scarpaw blinked, meeting his pale gaze.

"I'll go with you. I don't think I can stand being stuck in here any longer."

"Are you sure? This rain isn't letting up anytime soon."

"Of course," Scarpaw mewed, "we can check around the camp's entrance."

Woodpaw only hesitantly nodded, following her out into the rain. Scarpaw could tell he was hoping to sneak out of camp, but she couldn't let him; she had to figure out what he was up to. Waving her tail for him to follow, she padded through the camp's entrance, ducking under the large mangrove root and emerging out into the marshy wilderness. Destroyed patches of bracken lined the ground, and she began picking up as much as possible, wincing at the mud and leaves in her mouth but keeping a close eye on the smaller tom. He was standing uncomfortably behind her, a pained expression hidden in his eyes, but immediately began grabbing as

much as he could when Scarpaw caught his gaze. She blinked, dropping her twigs at her feet to speak, narrowing her eyes.

"Woodpaw, is there something the matter?" He stopped, twitching an ear, not meeting her gaze.

"What do you mean?"

"You've been acting strange ever since the gathering," she called over the howling wind and rain, "I'm worried about you; we all are."

He stopped collecting twigs, slowly placing them at his paws as the rain pelted his frail form. Taking a shaky breath, he shook his head. "No one's worried about me; and that's how it should be. Please, don't try and get involved, Scarpaw. It's nothing, okay?"

Scarpaw gulped, blinking against the rain, taking a slow step forward. "Woodpaw, please, what is going on? Is Venomsight making you hide something?" When the tom flinched, she took another step forward. "You know what's going on, don't you?"

The young tom was shaking now, ears flat. He crouched threateningly, a mixture of fear and pain reflecting in his eyes. "Please, Scarpaw, stay out of this."

"You don't have to push me away," she yowled, desperately trying to speak above the wind. Thunder boomed in the distance. "I can help if you just *tell* me, Woodpaw! What are you hiding? Is Venomsight behind your mothers death?"

Lightning cracked in the sky above, outlining his small form as he leapt, claws unsheathed, towards the she-cat. Scarpaw went to dodge, finding only slippery mud, falling with a splash as she braced herself for a pounce, closing her eyes against the pelting rain. She heard a loud thud followed by vicious yowling and hissing, opening her eyes to see a flurry of silver and brown fur thrashing on the ground. Leopardpaw was trying desperately to pin the smaller tom, but despite his lack of strength, he moved swiftly in the slippery mud. Scarpaw watched as he landed a blow on her cheek, sending droplets of red through the air, causing Leopardpaw to lose her grip and sending Woodpaw sprinting off towards the

lake. She stood with a hiss, and Scarpaw rushed over, breathing heavily.

"Leopardpaw, are you alright? What are you doing here?"

"Saving your flank," she spat, blood dripping down into her mouth from a nasty cut. "I heard you two leaving and got a bad feeling. I came to make sure nothing happened, and good thing, too; I knew that flea-bag couldn't be trusted."

Scarpaw shook her head, still in shock from the situation. "He's hurt and confused; he doesn't know what he's doing."

"Scarpaw, he leapt on you, claws out. If I hadn't stepped in, he would've torn you to shreds!"

"We have to find him," Scarpaw whispered, gazing towards the patch of undergrowth where he disappeared to. "We don't have much time."

"We're coming too." Sparkpaw's mew sounded from behind the two she-cats as they spun, watching as he and Maskpaw both padded into the clearing from a nearby shrub. They looked miserable and soaked, but their eyes glowed with fierce determination. Sparkpaw stepped forward, flexing his claws. "I don't understand whats going on here, but if Woodpaw was pushed to the point of attacking you, something is definitely wrong."

Maskpaw nodded, with shoulders hunched. "Yeah, he wouldn't do that; ever."

"Well, he did," Leopardpaw growled, "and we're going to find out why."

"It's Venomsight," Scarpaw hissed, "he's behind all this somehow. We have to find them."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Maskpaw stalked towards the spot Woodpaw ran off to, growling. "It looks like he's headed towards the stream."

"Then thats where were going." Scarpaw padded to his side,

exchanging a glance with the prickly tom. His eyes glowed with frustration, but for once, he gave no condescending remark. Thankful, Scarpaw took off, the other apprentices not far behind. When another flash of lightning boomed overhead, she almost thought she could feel the presence of another cat running alongside her, giving her strength; she pushed past all her weariness and exhaustion, eyes trained ahead. Woodpaw needed her.

Chapter 25

Through the pelting rain in her eyes, Scarpaw could make out the brambles leading towards the stream up ahead. She lifted her tail to warn the other apprentices, coming to a halt, using the storm to her advantage; Woodpaw had to be up ahead, and she had a feeling that rushing into this situation would only make things worse.

The other apprentices followed, keeping their bodies low to the mud, as Scarpaw crept forward to peek through the leaves. The stream was pulsing violently, deadly currents threatening to pull a cat under and never let go. She found Woodpaw hunched over, dangerously close to the edge, ears flat against the harsh wind and staring blankly into the dark water. The soft soil he stood on was corroding in the water at his paws.

He's going to be pulled in! She thought frantically.

"Woodpaw!", she called, emerging from their hiding place. The other apprentices were hesitant to follow, Leopardpaw and Maskpaw exchanging worried glances, as Sparkpaw kept his eyes trained on Scarpaw. Woodpaw didn't even flinch at his name being called through the booming thunder.

"Woodpaw," she screeched again, "what do you think you're doing? You have to get away from the edge, now!" A harsh gale of wind almost swept Scarpaw off her feet. She lowered her body to the ground, unsheathing her claws to try and dig into the mud, while Woodpaw continued to stand at the edge. His small form was being tossed side to side by the wind around him, yet his eyes stayed trained ahead, glassy and clouded with shock. He lifted his head slowly towards the apprentices, blinking rain away as he shook his head, slowly.

"This is what I deserve," he called over the storm, "You shouldn't be here. You should just leave me alone." Leopardpaw hissed,

padding to stand at Scarpaw's side.

"Tell us whats going on, Woodpaw. This is madness!" He only took another step closer to the edge, turning his head towards the raging water. His eyes were glassy, focused on something in the churning waves that no one could see. If she didn't do something now, Woodpaw would be swept under, and she would be helpless. All the while the apprentices struggled to keep themselves steady, and Scarpaw kept her gaze locked onto Woodpaw.

"I've failed as an apprentice," Woodpaw growled, "and I only get in the way of his plans. I'm not going to be a warrior like you." He was speaking directly to her now, and she began padding towards him, feeling the ground sink below her. If she could just get within tail length of him, she could bite onto him and yank him to steady ground. However, one paw-step too close and the ground around them both may collapse. She had to get him to walk towards her.

"Venomsight has always been hard on you for no reason, Woodpaw," she mewed, "but that's all it is, right? What plan are you talking about?" Woodpaw locked eyes with her, blinking rain away.

"He wanted a son. I wanted to be that for him, but I can't; I'm not good enough. Pebblestar promised Opal would bear him a son, so I'm not needed anymore." Tears streamed down his cheeks, ears flat. "I never knew my father, and now my mother is dead. No one wants me now."

"*We* want you," Scarpaw yowled, testing the soil in front of her. It was too soft, and she was running out of time; the rushing water was beginning to lose its patience. "Venomsight has planted these thoughts in your head; none of them are true. You don't need him, you have us, Woodpaw!" A glimmer shined in his eyes for a moment, seeing her for the first time. So much pain and loneliness swam through his pale yellow gaze, dreams that never came true.

"I don't want to die," he finally whispered, attempting to take a step towards her. *'Almost there!'* she thought.

"Then get away from the water," she yowled, "and lets get our revenge on Venomsight together. We can finally expose him to the

clan; you can bring justice to your mother! To Pepperpelt!" Woodpaw was frantic now, suddenly aware of where he stood. He nodded, keeping eye contact with Scarpaw, as he prepared to leap. She was ready to catch him. All of her focus was concentrated on the small cat in front of her, and for a moment, the malicious storm around her seemed to freeze. All the wind and thunder, all of the pelting rain went silent, a sense of calm. Nothingness. It all happened so fast.

The churning mud at his paws, giving away to the hungry waves.

The soft soil lending no help as his claws slashed through the air, searching for something, anything, to catch onto.

His small silhouette outlined in the dark sky with a strike of lightning, leaving Scarpaw bolting forward, screaming Woodpaw's name, and Leopardpaw biting down deep into her scruff to keep her friend from following in his paw-steps. The other apprentices were calling her name now, saying things she couldn't hear; his frail body being dragged under the waves, attempting to keep his head above the surface but too weak to fight the raging river played over and over in her mind, the only sound being the pulsing of blood in her ears. She was being dragged away from the edge, no longer able to find him as he was swept downstream; The trees and bramble around her was all a blur. She found the ground under her paws, beginning to run alongside the others, who guided her forward. The sound of the storm came rushing back to her now, loud and piercing, along with the panicked breaths and sounds of her friends. Looking around, Scarpaw had Leopardpaw and Maskpaw at her sides; Sparkpaw wasn't with them.

"I sent him to get help back at camp," Leopardpaw called, her voice heavy with fear and sounding unnatural above the booming thunder. "Were going to stop Venomsight right here, right now."

They were headed for Thornclan territory.

Chapter 26

Racing among the marsh, Scarpaw thought of every moment spent with Woodpaw. All the training they shared, the way he always treated her as just another Rainclan cat. He was skittish, desperate to please, and weaker than most, but his will was strong, and his potential great. Venomsight stripped these away from him; Venomsight was to blame for all of this.

Her fury drove her paws forward, claws kicking up mud and dirt as she pelted through the rain, Leopardpaw and Maskpaw right at her heels. She didnt remember when she took the head of the chase, but there was no stopping her now. Venomsight had betrayed the warrior code, resulting in the deaths of her clan-mates, and he's on his way to Thornclan now, a traitor. He could be long gone by now; every muscle in Scarpaw's body was pulsing, pushing her back through their territory, along the great lake towards Thornclan's border. Woodpaw's death would not be in vain.

"Stop!" Maskpaw hissed, "I can smell Venomsight; and Thornclan with them." The three cats skidded to a halt, spraying up mud and rain around them, crouching low behind the undergrowth in front of them. They had reached the border; *They weren't too late!*

"Follow me," Scarpaw spoke in a low growl. Her fur was matted from the storm, but her green eyes blazed with her determination.

Creeping forward, using the storm to hide their movements and scent, the three peeked through the shrubs to reveal a patrol of cats in a clearing above; she recognized Pebblestar standing tall and menacing, his deputy Eelstrike crouched low at his side, along with Venomsight, Lizardeye, the Thornclan medicine cat, and a blond she-cat she didnt recognize, laying miserably on the ground. The other cats surrounded her, heads low. It took every ounce of her strength not to burst out of her hiding space and tear them all to shreds. Leopardpaw and Maskpaw tensed up next to her, exchanging glances, but understood; rushing into this was useless. They had to assess the situation.

Scarpaw turned her ears towards the group as a shrill yowl broke the sounds of the rain, loud and booming like thunder; Venomsight was shaking, face twisted with pain and rage, staring down at the she-cat below him. His tail was lashing behind him as he stood, turning towards Pebblestar with disgust.

"A daughter," he hissed, "you promised me a son." He spun towards the she-cat again, "you promised!"

The she-cat had her head turned up towards Venomsight in terror, bringing her tail closer to her body. She was shaking her head, unable to speak, as something small stirred at her belly; *A kit was there!*

Pebblestar took a heavy step forward, his piercing gaze burning into Venomsight's own. "She could still be strong," his voice was like a low rumble, "she is your kit, after all. Opal has provided us with only the strongest of kits."

Venomsight turned his eyes to Lizardeye, who was crouched low in fear; his eyes widened as Venomsight snarled, "You said Starclan prophesied a son."

Lizardeye looked down at his paws in shame as Pebblestar waved his tail, mewing, "Starclan told him of a strong child; nothing else."

"You lied to me," Venomsight hissed, "the deal is off. This kit is useless to me, just like you." He turned his attention back to the weak she-cat and her kit, trembling before him. "I'll kill you myself, just like Rosegaze and her litter." The kit was crying now, rain pelting down hard, and lightning crackled above, lighting up the sky. The kit's shrill cry filled Scarpaw's ears, panic running through her veins, as Venomsight raised his claws to strike. Pebblestar flicked an ear and Eelstrike launched from his spot next to his leader, claws out, towards Venomsight. The two fell to the ground before Venomsight could harm Opal, a mess of fur and claw, as Pebblestar simply watched the scene play out before him. The she-cat grabbed her kit by the scruff, trying to limp away, only to fall into the mud nearby with the crying kit still in her jaws. Eelstrike was smaller than Venomsight, but we was quick, slashing his enemy

in the face causing confusion and tripping him. In a flash, Venomsight yowled his anger as Eelstrike brought his claws to his throat, spraying blood through the air and onto the ground. Pebblestar watched in sick satisfaction as Venomsight twitched and gasped, only to fall still, his fiery gaze stuck clouded at the sky above. The stench of blood filled the air.

The apprentices could only watch in horror, Leopardpaw pressing herself closer to Scarpaw, and she could feel her friend trembling. Scarpaw's own body shook, claws unsheathed, as she stared at the now lifeless body of Venomsight before them. Eelstrike licked his bloody jowls, turning back to Pebblestar, who nodded with a grin. "He had no where else to go," He spoke, "and that puny apprentice of his is surely crow-food by now."

Eelstrike nodded, looking back at Venomsight's body with a glint in his eye. "He was a fool."

Scarpaw had seen enough. No longer able to hold back, she let out a shrill battle cry, bursting from their hiding place in the bracken. She puffed out her fur, feeling the other two run out after her, as she ran straight for Eelstrike, tackling him to the ground. Her surprise attack worked, leaving him in shock as she bit down hard into his shoulder, tasting bitter blood. He yowled, kicking her hard in the chest and sending her flying to the side with a heavy thud. She stood back up to catch her breath and lept quickly towards him again, slashing her fore claws and landing them on his flank; her body pulsed with new-found power.

Pebblestar stood, eyes wide, as he watched the fight. His shock didnt last long however as he ran forward, biting deep into Scarpaw's neck and tossing her off of his deputy, into a thorny bush that stabbed Scarpaw's pelt and left her gasping for breath on the ground.

"Rainclan cats," Pebblestar growled, "and apprentices at that. Get up, Eelstrike. These kittens pose no threat."

"You're wrong," Maskpaw growled, stepping in front of Scarpaw, eyes blazing. "I'll slice open your throat as many times as I have to until you're bloody, writhing crow-food." Leopardpaw took a

fighting stance next to him, lashing her tail side to side. Eelstrike scrambled back to his leaders side, blood dripping from the cuts Scarpaw left on him, and Pebblestar stared down at the three with cold curiosity. The rain on his pelt didnt make him seem any smaller, and his muscles flexed as his jowl stretched into a toothy smile.

"A warrior's spirit. It's a shame it will be wasted," he hissed, ears flat. "You Rainclan flea-bags are all the same. Weak, stubborn, and foolish. You'll die, just like Venomsight; at the paws of Thornclan." Maskpaw roared, leaping with claws outstretched at the leader, only to be caught in Pebblestar's strong claws. He brought Maskpaw to the ground swiftly, holding his heavy paw to Maskpaw's throat. He thrashed wildly under the weight, claws slashing up towards Pebblestar's underbelly, but he wasn't at a good enough angle to do any damage. Leopardpaw rushed forward to help but was stopped by Eelstrike, who tackled the spotted she-cat, distracting her. Scarpaw forced herself to stand, watching in horror as Pebblestar unsheathed his claws into Maskpaw's throat, causing him to yowl in pain. His thrashing was weakening, blood dripping onto Pebblestar's long claws. She pelted forward, slamming her body into Pebblestar's, who released his deadly grip on Maskpaw. The apprentice lay motionless as Scarpaw was batted away by Pebblestar's heavy paw, blood filling her nose. Panic swept through her senses; *we can't win this fight.*

Scarpaw coughed on the ground, dizzy, as she looked towards Leopardpaw, who was still locked in battle with Eelstrike. He was only toying with her, dodging and weaving, leaving bloody cuts on Leopardpaw's flank as he did so. She was fighting with the strength of all Lionclan, but Eelstrike was quicker. It was only a matter of time before he got bored of her.

Maskpaw still lay motionless at Pebblestar's paws, Lizardeye crouching with Opal now, and Scarpaw felt hot fire in her veins as she tried to stand. She couldn't focus, she was weak- but she still tried scrambling back towards the leader, only to fall to the ground again. She couldn't die like this; she *couldn't.* Venomsight's body lay next to her, jaws frozen in a pained jowl, and she watched it with a deep sadness. They had tried so hard, and had failed. Woodpaw,

Rosegaze, Pepperpelt; all were left with no justice. They had lost.

Just then, Venomsight slowly lifted his head, his amber gaze burning into Scarpaw's face, worried and searching. Her blood ran cold as she watched. He spoke, but she couldn't hear him; she watched him die, how was this possible?

Blinking, she realized it was Stormspirit in front of her, not Venomsight. Her mentor prodded her with his paw, sniffing her body, and stood to face Pebblestar. '*What is Stormspirit doing here?'* she thought, looking past him to see Snowstar, Nightbreeze, Toadface, Dawnleaf, Owltail, Sagefur, Webear, and Sparkpaw, all surrounding the clearing. Her vision began to focus more, noticing Eelstrike had backed away from his fight and was now crouched hissing at Pebblestar's side; Owltail was holding a limp Leopardpaw by her scruff.

'They made it,' Scarpaw whimpered to herself, *'Sparkpaw went to get help; we haven't failed!'*

"Pebblestar," Snowstar snarled, his warriors ready for battle beside him, "you have trespassed on Rainclan territory for the last time." The Rainclan cats rippled with strength, eyes blazing, claws out. Even a kit would know that compared to these numbers, Pebblestar and his cats had no chance of victory. Pebblestar eyed the patrol carefully, not daring to take a single paw-step in any direction. His eyes eventually went back to Snowstar, a low grumble sounding from deep in his throat. There was a long period of silence, filled with tension, as the two stared at each other, their eyes narrow slits. Every cat was ready to leap.

"Im not enough of a fool to not know when I've been beaten," Pebblestar spoke, not bothering to raise his voice above the storm. "but this is not the end."

Snowstar took a lethal step forward, drawing back his lips. "You asked for my answer at the next gathering concerning your request, Pebblestar, and i've decided it cannot wait until then. My answer is, if I catch even a whiff of your mange-covered scent on the wind anywhere near our territory, I'll make sure the name Thornclan is stripped from history. You and your warriors have made a grave

mistake, Pebblestar, and these actions mean war." The clearing was silent except for the thunder and rain. Maskpaw was coughing now, gasping for air, and Scarpaw saw Nightbreeze shaking; she wanted to get to her apprentice, but he still lay at Pebblestar's paws. *Pebblestar isn't so stupid to try anything now, is he?*

Pebblestar stepped back from the apprentice, waving his tail for his medicine cat and deputy. Lizardeye sent a shameful look towards Webear, who showed only anger, and the three began backing away, out of the clearing. Opal still lay with her kit, close to the Rainclan patrol. She held her kit even closer to her chest.

Without another word, the three Thornclan cats darted away, scrambling through the thorny brush, their short fur not even snagging as they ran. Snowstar looked towards Dawnleaf and Sagefur, hissing, "Follow them," and with a curt nod, the two took off in their direction. The rest of the Rainclan patrol lifted their heads high to the dark clouds above which covered the moon, and yowled a victory call, shrill and full of strength. Scarpaw was left watching in awe, pride and relief flooding her body. This was her clan; this was her home.

She snapped out of her haze quickly, however, attempting to stand and limp towards her leader. "Snowstar," she mewed hoarsely, "I'm sorry. We... We tried as hard as we could, but..." he silenced her with a lift of his tail, his deep blue gaze much softer now. He brought his head down to nuzzle into the apprentice, mewing, "You proved yourself a warrior tonight, Scarpaw. All four of you." She returned the nuzzle, letting the rain slide down her pelt. It wasn't coming down as hard as before, she noticed, and the coolness felt nice on her stinging wounds.

Sparkpaw came padding up and Scarpaw lifted her head to touch noses with him, his scent comforting her senses. "I came as quick as I could," he panted, ears flat. "I knew you would need help."

"The entire clan did nicely," Scarpaw purred, a bit shocked at the size of the battle patrol he brought along with him. He smiled, nodding.

"Sure did. We scared the fleas right out of their miserable pelts!" She blinked warmly into his gaze for a moment, taking it in, before turning her head to survey the scene. Owltail was sitting with Leopardpaw who was beginning to regain consciousness, her wounds non fatal; Nightbreeze was surveying Maskpaw, and Stormspirit and Toadface were crouched over Venomsight's body. Scarpaw felt a wave of pity for her mentor; his brother may have been corrupted and a traitor, but he was blood, and that was a feeling Scarpaw understood very well. Blood is hard to lose no matter the circumstances, and now, Venomsight's was splayed in the clearing, being washed away by the rain above.

A rustle in the bushes nearby caused Scarpaw's ears to prick up, her head spinning to the spot behind her. Dawnpelt and Sagefur back already? No, they went the other direction...

'More Thornclan warriors?', she thought in panic. Standing, she bolted into the undergrowth, following the sound. It was too large to be anything but a cat, and it was moving fast. She wouldn't let any other cat cause any more trouble. Limbs burning, she ran, panting heavily as the cat ahead of her came into view. *'Almost there!'*

The cat stopped suddenly, causing Scarpaw to run straight into them. The two tumbled onto the ground, flinging up mud, and Scarpaw shook her head to get a better look at the invader. It smelled much different, not like the Thornclan warriors before...

"Hawkheart?" Scarpaw yowled, eyes wide, as she took in the cat before her. Her sister stood, shaking her messy pelt, hissing quietly towards Scarpaw.

"Hush, will you?" she looked around, narrowing her eyes, and walked deeper into the undergrowth. Scarpaw was too stunned to speak, watching her sister attempt to hide herself. *What was she doing here? And after the attack just now...*

"Were you watching the entire time?" Scarpaw spoke hoarsely, her fur rising. Hawkheart's amber gaze locked onto Scarpaw's, giving away nothing.

"Yes."

"But... why? What are you doing here?" Scarpaw blinked, her shock turning into cold anger. "You're trespassing on Rainclan territory."

"You're not the only clan suspicious of Pebblestar's plans." Hawkheart lowered herself to the ground, showing no fear at Scarpaw's reaction. "Tanglestar thought something was strange. She sent me to spy, and we she was right; they're up to something dark."

Scarpaw began to calm down, crouching down as well, curiosity pricking at her paws. "You shouldn't be here. Spy or not, you're trespassing, and with the state of our clan right now, they'll tear you to shreds."

"Im following orders, just like you." Hawkheart's ear twitched, her voice silky and comforting. Scarpaw took in every detail she could; her long, dark tabby pelt that matched her own, her muscled limbs, the scars along her side. Hawkheart seemed so experienced for being so young.

"You haven't been sneaking through our territory like this often, have you?"

"Of course not. This is my first time. If it was up to me, I wouldn't ever set a paw in this wet, uncomfortable place."

"Well, why didn't you help us when they attacked?" Scarpaw mewed, uncertainty causing her tail to twitch. If she was there the whole time, she would have seen Scarpaw and her clan mates close to death. What would she have done of the patrol never came?

"I couldn't! It would only cause more problems for you, *and* for me. Rainclan helped us once, and we owe nothing to you for it; not after *you* joined them. bursting in would only make us seem as if we have an alliance, and fuel Thornclan even further." Hawkheart's eyes flashed, narrowing. "You should understand; Swifttail died in the attack *your* clan assisted in."

Father. Scarpaw flattened her ears, looking away. "I know. You

don't have to remind me. I suppose I understand, but..."

"Scarpaw!" Stormspirit's mew came calling from behind the two she cats, and Hawkheart's pelt rose. She stood, shaking rain from her thick pelt, and locked eyes with Scarpaw once more.

"I must leave. I can't be seen here; you said it yourself. Ive seen enough to report to Tanglestar about Thornclan, and I'll be leaving now." She turned and lept into the undergrowth leading back towards the great lake. Scarpaw blinked, standing; there was so much more she wanted to say.

"Wait," she called, "when can we meet again?" Hawkheart stopped, turning back towards her sister. Her eyes were searching, curious. Unreadable.

"Soon. I will return," Hawkheart mewed, and continued down the slope. Her tail disappeared just as Stormspirit came padding behind Scarpaw, letting out a breath of relief.

"Great Starclan, why did you run off like that?"

"I thought I heard more Thornclan warriors," She stammered, suddenly noticing how weak she felt. Her paws were ready to give way under her, and Stormspirit noticed this, supporting his apprentice on his side.

"Come; they're gone now. We must return to camp." Scarpaw nodded, letting her head rest on Stormspirit's strong pelt. He guided her back to the clearing as her head began to race with thoughts of her sister; she could tell no one of this. It would only cause problems, just like she said. She would stay quite until they met again, whenever that would be. For now, she shut her eyes, taking in the scent of her mentor and the forest; the rain was falling softly now, the stars and moon slowly appearing behind the clouds.

In the clearing, Webear had found Opal and her kit, and was sniffing over the queen while Snowstar and Toadface stood closely.

Opal had explained that she was a rogue living with Thornclan alongside many others, promised safety by Pebblestar. Venomsight was giving away secrets to the cruel leader in exchange for Opal's kits, expecting a son. She agreed out of fear, but only wanted her and her kit to be safe. The daughter was dirty, but not wounded, thankfully. Webear saw that she was alright before giving Snowstar the o-k to return back to camp, promising Opal the nursery and help of the other queens. Reluctantly, she agreed.

Scarpaw stood huddled with the other apprentices, who were battered and bloody, but conscious; they all pressed close to each other, mourning Woodpaw. Sparkpaw had filled the clan in on the incident, but the pain still stung deep; Scarpaw saw him falling into the churning river, over and over.

Looking up towards Opal, carrying her kit by the scruff alongside Webear, Scarpaw felt a new feeling rise in her chest. The kit was blond and soft like her mother, peaceful, sleeping. All this death, all this pain, and this young kit, new to the world. Scarpaw remembered the words of Leopardpaw, back during their training; a new kit really is a good omen.

Chapter 27

It was the first sunny morning the clans had seen in a few days, the trees and grass still wet from the storm. A relaxing breeze blew through camp as every cat gathered under the Half-tree at the call of Snowstar, a loud buzz of voices and excited gossip spreading in the air like a swarm of bees. Scarpaw, Leopardpaw, Sparkpaw, and Maskpaw all made their way to the front, freshly groomed, to sit beside their mentors at the foot of the great stump. They were still in pretty rough shape from the night before, but they wore their battle scars well, and Leopardpaw made it her mission to show them off to anyone who glanced her way. She puffed her chest out as she sat next to Owltail, a thick puffy scar spread there, and Owltail batted her behind the ears playfully. Scarpaw twitched her whiskers in amusement as Snowstar gazed across the clan, Suntail and Webear seated on the stones below. Everyone was watching in anticipation.

"Cats of Rainclan, I gather you here today beneath the Half-tree for a very important ceremony. These four apprentices have proven their worth to our clan through their determination, their ability to learn and adapt to their training, and with their bravery. It has come time to name them warriors." Scarpaw felt her pelt bristle as Snowstar turned his head towards Maskpaw, the first apprentice, and he couldn't hide his excitement either. Despite his cool demeanor, Scarpaw noticed his neck fur bristle, and Nightbreeze was glowing with pride.

"Maskpaw, you will now be known as Maskclaw." His eyes brightened at his new name, and Nightbreeze bent to lick his head, purring. Scarpaw saw Berryface, his mother, smiling brightly from the nursery. Snowstar turned next to Sparkpaw, mewing, "Sparkpaw, I name you Sparkwhisker." Toadface nodded curtly, his tail stump twitching. Sparkwhisker smiled, Fawneyes calling his name from the back of the crowd. Leopardpaw was nearly bursting out of her pelt as Snowstar turned his gaze towards her, and for once, Owltail didnt try and contain his apprentice's excitement.

"Leopardpaw, your name will be Leopardeye." She squealed, whiskers twitching, and Scarpaw took a deep breath. It was her turn now.

Snowstar looked down at her, something flashing in his blue gaze. He hesitated for a moment, seeming uncertain. Scarpaw blinked, anticipation crawling at her pelt as he looked lost in his thoughts, debating something unknown to her. After a long silence, he blinked, nodding slowly. "Scarpaw, your name will now be... Scarleg." She blinked, and the sounds of the forest around her seemed to deafen in her ears. What was this feeling inside of her chest? Not pride, nor excitement for her new name; it was more like shame, like anger, like... pain. Scarleg was not the name she had expected to receive. All the other cats were given names to represent their strengths and their values, while she was given a reminder of where she came from and why she is different from those around her. Why she feels like she doesn't belong. She could hear the crowd repeating the name over and over, and the realization struck her. Despite the name, she was now a warrior. Stormspirit purred loudly, pressing his muzzle into her pelt as she smiled. She glanced down at her scarred hind leg, and couldn't help but wonder what Snowstar's intentions were in giving her that name. Looking back at him standing atop the stump, his expression was clouded, icy. She felt rigid beneath that gaze. The chanting crowd only grew, and she took a deep breath, trying to regain some kind of grounding. She had her warrior name now, and had completed her training. Despite it all, she was proud of herself.

"With these names, you four are welcomed as Rainclan warriors. Mentors, you all succeeded in training these four strong apprentices, and I am honored to have such strong cats in our clan." The entire crowd was chanting their names now, and the four apprentices looked to one another, sharing in their pride. Scarleg shut her eyes, taking in the sounds and the nudges of the cats around her.

Snowstar raised his tail for silence, allowing the new warriors to join the rest of the crowd. Scarleg noticed Maskclaw sitting with Sagefur, exchanging warm embraces. It brought a smile to her face.

"Now, we still have more to celebrate. Dawnleaf, Opal, please bring

your kits forward." Dawnleaf stood from the edge of the crowd, walking forward with her two excited kits behind her. They were the kits Scarleg and Leopardeye watched play from outside the nursery; they had reached six months, and were ready to become apprentices! Opal also stood from the very back, walking nervously through the crowd to sit next to her. She seemed uncomfortable with all the clan eyes watching her, and pulled her small kit closer towards her body.

"Dawnleaf, it is time your kits leave the nursery and join the apprentice den. Cricketkit, Finchkit, step forward." The two tumbling kits, wide eyed, practically tumbled over each other; Scarleg laughed, remembering feeling the same way during her apprentice ceremony. The she-kit, Cricketkit, pushed her brother Finchkit away as Snowstar spoke.

"Cricketkit, Finchkit, you will now be known as Cricketpaw and Finchpaw. Sagefur, you will be mentor to Cricketpaw, and Patchnose will be mentor to Finchpaw. You both have not yet received an apprentice, and I trust you will pass all you have learned from your previous mentors onto these fine young kits." The two mentors walked up with pride, touching noses with their respective apprentices, Cricketkit ecstatic to be trained by her father.

"Don't think I'll go easy on you," He purred, Dawnleaf licking both of her kits. Snowstar hopped down from the Half-tree to bend noses to the two new apprentices, then turned his attention to Opal and her kit.

"Opal will be staying with us in Rainclan, as it is unsafe for her to return to Thornclan. We will care for her kit in anyway possible." He bent his head in respect, and she nodded, still seeming uncomfortable.

Nightbreeze stood from her place in the crowd, mewing, "Are we sure this is the best choice, Snowstar? I don't foresee Thornclan being very keen on allowing us to keep their rogue in our camp." A few cats murmured agreement, while many others stayed silent. Snowstar flicked his tail, not turning towards Nightbreeze to say, "We will not fear Thornclan. This queen and her kit need help, and

that we will provide." Nightbreeze said nothing, and sat down.

Snowstar turned his head back to Opal. "Have you decided on a name for your kit, Opal?" She blinked, looking down at her kit, licking her between her small ears.

"Honey," she mewed, "Honeykit, as you clan cats say." Snowstar nodded, turning his head to the crowd. "We welcome Opal and Honeykit." The clan repeated the name, easing Opal's discomfort, and Scarlegs joined in. So much growth had come from last night's terror, and while the future promised many more uncertainties, the clan could celebrate something good, and celebrate they did.

Scarleg, Leopardeye, Sparkwhisker, and Maskclaw all sat at the entrance to camp, the moon and stars shining brightly above. It is stated in the warrior code that all new warriors must sit in silent vigil on the night of their naming ceremony, and they all sat together, listening to the lush sounds of the marsh and distant birds in the night. Scarleg looked at her friends, who looked at her in return. They could not speak, but they all understood what each other was thinking; Woodpaw deserved to be here with them.

Scarleg lifted her head to the sky, watching the stars blink softly. Woodpaw would be among them tonight, with his mother. She imaged the two, curled close and comforting, and closed her eyes. If only she had been a bit quicker, a bit closer...

Sparkwhisker's tail fell softly on her own, and she looked to him to see his blue-green gaze burning into hers with passion and emotion. She blinked slowly back, lucky to have him here with her, safe. Her whisker's twitched in amusement as she noticed Sparkwhisker was the least-scarred of the four, as he was busy gathering the patrol during the battle. He tilted his head in confusion but she shrugged it off with a smile; *I'll tell him later.*

Scarleg thought of Venomsight, and all the pain he caused for his

clan, all for his own selfish wants and desires. Looking back towards the elders den, she caught sight of Coldclaw's grumpy, sleeping form. Everything Venomsight did, just to impress his father... was it worth it? Does Coldclaw grieve for his corrupted son, as Stormspirit silently grieves for his brother?

She shook her pelt, turning her eyes back up towards the stars. She hoped her father, Swifttail, was watching her now. Would he be proud? What would he tell her, about her sister? Is she doing the right thing?

As her thoughts began to cloud her heart, a single star twinkled brightly above. She blinked, watching it, as it grew brighter and brighter. A shooting star flew across the sky, disappearing as quickly as it appeared, and in her mind she heard the familiar words;

"Look up, and you will find me."

The fur on her neck rose as she watched the twinkling star, warmth spreading through her body. Her father was there, watching her. She wasn't alone after all.

Turning back to gaze at her friends, she was filled with a sudden sense of excitement for tomorrow. They will officially be warriors, hunting and fighting alongside their clan. No matter what comes next, they'll face it together, and Scarleg was ready. She shut her eyes, taking in the night sounds once more. The cicadas singing, an owl cooing softly in the distance, the wind in the trees, seeming to whisper, *'be strong, be strong...'*

Thanks & Acknowledgments (+Extras!)

[image]

Thank you all for your overflowing support of my fan-made warriors novel, Warriors: Black Rain! This book has been a project of many years of hard work, and I appreciate everyone who has helped me along the way. Thank you to my loving family, my friends, and to the Erin's, who are responsible for the core of my inspiration and for providing years of love with their books.

This isn't the end for Scarleg and her clan! Black Rain is only the first book in the Warriors: Shadows of the Past series, planned to have a minimum of three novels, and the second book is already in development and should make its appearance here very soon!

Find me on instagram as @/gooeystars, and on Warriors Amino as @/Snailfleck for any and all updates on this series, and to get to know the characters and world of Warriors: Shadows of the Past better! Once again, thank you for all your overwhelming support, and keep an eye out for more in the Shadows of the Past series! May Starclan light your path.

~ Kenz, author & illustrator

EXTRAS

Full body illustration of Scarleg! She's gone through many design changes and tweaks throughout the years, but I'm finally content with her official design shown here. More character illustrations soon to come!

Other interpretations of Scarleg and the other characters by you, the readers, are always welcome, as well! In fact, I'd love to see how you may have ended up seeing the characters introduced throughout my story!

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